

Prologue

There, my dear Shinou¹ from the other world, or however you'd like to name yourself. I'd say that we have raised our son just as you wish. With black hair and eyes from his Japanese DNA, he possesses a heart full of zeal, perseverance, a keen sense of justice, and the strong mind of a game leader.

It's still a mystery to me why my wife and I had been entrusted with the heavy responsibility of raising the next Maou. Nevertheless, I am proud to say that our nurture and education have produced a masterpiece. My wife would certainly agree with me on this.

However, there's one thing we would like to clarify from the beginning. My wife and I would never completely give our son away to you! Whatever happens, he will forever remain Yuri Shibuya, our child. And if he is mistreated in any way, we will take him back, by all means. Yuri! My boy! No one has done anything bad to you, right? If anything ever troubles your heart, remember that your father's shoulder is always here for you to lean on. You can always talk to me about everything, as a man to a man.

But tell me, Yuri, don't you think that lately you have become somewhat distant to your father?

¹ Shinou (Shin-Ou): literally means the Original King. It is not a proper name as many people think. In fact, out of respect for their god and first king, the mazokus have made the real name of the original king a taboo, not to be pronounced out loud, and so everyone calls him Shinou.

Chapter 1

A date at the Sea World aquarium. With a guy. Oh, great. Why does this happen to me only?

It was summer vacation, time for the baseball. The newly formed amateur team and the Seibu Lions, of which I have been a devoted fan most of my life, took up all of my time. Until I got a call from Murata.

"She rejected me," he said moodily.

"Who? Your girlfriend?" I asked, curiously.

"No, I had planned to ask a girl to go out with me on a date to Sea World, then confess my feelings to her. So I bought pre-sale tickets, but she turned me down."

"So you confessed, and she turned you down?"

"No, I did not confess. She didn't even want to go to Sea World with me."

"What? But that doesn't mean she rejected you, maybe she just couldn't join you this time."

"But I feel rejected." Murata sighed. "And I had already bought the tickets."

Although I tried to cheer him up, Murata only smiled weakly. He didn't want to waste the tickets he had bought, but it was troublesome to return them. He was willing to give them away, but it was near the end of July, and most of our friends had already had plans.

"Well, of course that's unfortunate."

"Don't you want to go?"

"When is it?"

"The tickets are for the 28th."

"But that's when we have the night game at the Seibu Dome..." I protested.

"Oh, to hell with the night game!" Murata said irritated, which was unusual for him. "Have you forgotten how much time I've sacrificed for your stupid baseball games? Not just the games, you dragged me along to the training sessions too. And now you choose a damned game over your good old friend, even when he has a broken heart?! Come on, it costs you nothing. I've already paid for tickets. Come with me, please!"

"Okay, okay, I understand, I'll go with you. But I have to say that if you're persistent enough, she will eventually give in."

My friend looked up to the sky with an exaggerated expression.

"Shibuya Yuri Harajuku Furi, naive as you are, you can't possibly know how it's like."

"Wait, Murata! How old are you after all? And this has nothing to do with Harajuku Furi at all!"



And so Murata and I, Yuri Shibuya, spent the day at the Sea World aquarium. Yes, my name is Yuri Shibuya. Yuri as in 'advantage' with the same kanji script as 'interest,' not a gentle pear or anything like that. I had spent a big part of my 15 years of life being teased for this stupid name.

As my father worked in the bank, I had thought that I had been given this name because my father was always thinking about interest rates¹. But then I found out that the blame was on a friendly young man who had shared his taxi ride with my mother, when she was on her way to the hospital to give birth to me. Even so, at least they could have chosen a different kanji for the name, which would have given it a different meaning! Well, yes, I consoled myself with the thought that my brother had got a worse deal: His name meant "victory"! Shibuya Victory, that was even a bigger laugh than my name!

Anyway, that afternoon I got stuck at the Sea World aquarium with a guy, who insisted that he was rejected by a girl, while it couldn't be worse than a one-time refusal. And so the two of us, one boy wearing glasses and one baseball fan, went to Sea World together, surrounded by couples and parents with their children. Walking along the glass tunnel that ran right through the water, we could see the nautiluses, the fire fish, the banner fish, the Arapaima, and the sawfish swimming gracefully together with the delicious sardines and bonitos.

"If only I were with a sweet girl!" I sighed.

"Man, what is it now? You're bitching all the time."

"Hey, I was only cursing my lonely existence, you know. Tomorrow I'll turn sixteen, and I still have no girlfriend."

"Tomorrow is your birthday?! I had no idea. Tell me then, what do you want for your birthday? Look here, do you want a cell phone strap from the gift shop? This one is really cute, isn't it?"

"A cell phone strap? But you know my phone is broken."

"Then it's a good time to buy a new one. The texting function is quite convenient."

I sighed and looked at the back of my right hand. The entry stamp for the day visitors had been pressed on my skin with a special ink. If I held my hand under a scanner, the stamp glowed with a pale mark.

"I don't need a cell phone. And I have no use for texting function."

"You don't need a cell phone?! What is this nonsense? Everyone needs a cell phone. And that's why everyone has indeed got one, except you. Sometimes I really think you come from another world!"

If you only knew!

It had only been three months ago that I fell through a toilet and landed in another world! Really! And I had even been declared king against my will. No kidding! I, a fifteen-year-old high school student with average looks and ordinary intelligence, was really and truly been appointed king of the mazokus!

¹ This is a little play on words based on the kanji of the name "Yuuri," which is translated as "advantage / benefit / interest." The kanji "ri" in "yuuri" can be combined with other kanji to form many different words, but all are related to banking terms. Examples: "rieki" (earnings / profit / interest), "kinri" (interest rates), "riken" (interest / rights / concession), etc. And worst of all, his name has the kanji "yuuri" (Advantageous / best / good / profitable). As Yuri's father works in a bank, it would appear like he was obsessed enough with interest rates to put something related to that in the name of his own child. So Yuuri complains that even though Conrart suggested the name, those who chose these kanji were his parents. Apart from this, and since "Yuuri" means "advantage", there is another joke: Shibuya Yuuri Harajuku Furi. Harajuku is a train station which is next to the station Shibuya, while "furi" means "handicap / unfavorable / disadvantageous," the exact antonym of "yuuri."

Of course initially I thought I was dreaming. But when I woke up, hung around my neck was a pendant that someone from that world had given me. It was a stone the size of a 500 yen coin, which I wore around my neck ever since. It had silver rim and was of a blue color deeper than the sky, the color of the Seibu Lions. This charm stone reminded me every day that it had not been a dream. It was for real: I was born with the soul of a mazoku and had committed to protect Shin Makoku, the kingdom of the mazokus.

"Hurry up and take your number, Shibuya." Murata pushed me.

An employee at Sea World handed me a piece of green paper.

"Hmmm? Ah yes, thanks."

We had moved away from the exit of the aquarium and were now at the entrance to the show "Friends of the Sea." A heat wave suddenly hit us: we were in an open stadium and the summer sun was burning mercilessly above us. We walked down tiers of blue benches, looking for two empty seats. At the other side of the large water pool was the white performance stage.

"Shit, it's hot!" I complained.

"Stop whining! If you hadn't come with me, you would be running around in your baseball uniform in the same heat."

Although I knew it was almost no use, I fanned with a piece of paper. A cool breeze brushed against my neck for a moment.

"Are there at least girls in swimsuits?"

"Why don't you look at the stage?" Murata said.

Sure enough! There were the trainers - in bathing suits - with seals.

My thoughts wandered. Who was more majestic, the emperor penguin or me? Which formation should my team take for the practice match next week? Tilting my head to one side, I absentmindedly watched the seals performance: a seal headed a soccer ball through a basketball hoop, and a woman in a swimsuit tapped a pink drum vigorously.

"27! Number 27! Would you please come to the stage?"

On the adjacent seat, a toddler clung to the knees of his father and started to bawl.

"Hey, Shibuya!" Murata called out and prodded me with his elbow. "Number 27! That's you!"

"Sorry, what am I?"

"The visitor with the number 27! May I ask you to come on stage?"

"Go on, go on! Hurry up, otherwise they will think you're not here at all."

I glanced at the piece of paper in my hand. It had indeed number 27 printed on it. With a broad smile, Murata grabbed my arm and pulled me down the stair, as if he won a lottery.

"Hey! Slow down! Not so fast!" I protested.

The trainer put a blue cap on my head and led me through an acrylic door. Then she gave me a small thing that was hanging from her fingers.

"Congratulations! These are your souvenirs, a cool dolphin cap, and a key chain with a cute little dolphin. I'll trap it to your belt so you won't lose it."

I was still in a daze.

Indeed, my gifts were all decorated with gray-blue dolphins. The cap had a brim shaped as the dolphin's beak, and two black eyes on two sides. The key chain had a little dolphin dangling with his beak slightly open. It looked very cute, much nicer than the real dolphin.

"On behalf of our audience, could I ask you to shake hand with our stars today?" said the young woman smiling. Whom am I going to shake hands with? A dolphin? No way!

Without saying a word, three people from the staff pulled me to the side of the pool.

"Wait, wait a minute! Dolphins are not really my favorite. Don't you have a couple of whales or sea lions I could shake hands with?"

No response.

"Here we are, our friends Bando and Eiji, the bottlenose dolphins!" The trainer announced.

Two shiny gray dorsal fins came gliding through the water to the side of the pool next to us.

"Hey guys! That wasn't a joke! I really do not get along with dolphins!"

Still no reaction.

"Hey, Murata, Murata! Please help me!"

"Shibuya, you lucky devil! I envy you!"

Then one of the two dolphins, I couldn't tell whether he was Eiji or Bando, jumped out of the water then fell down, splashing all around. Holy shit! The beast was huge! He extended a blue-green shimmering flipper toward me, his eyes looking straight at me and his beak slightly open, showing two rows of small sharp teeth like a zipper.

"There goes my sixteenth birthday tomorrow," I muttered.

"Don't be scared! He's not going to bite you."

There was no way out; the staff had blocked my escape route. The dolphin was at my feet and still looked at me attentively, his flexible tail and waist muscle moving gracefully as he stood floating in the water. "Hey you, human! Let's get this over with quickly, so I can finally have my sardines!" His eyes seemed to say to me. He opened his gaping beak and a screech filled the air "Kschaaaaaa!"

"Ahhhhh!" I also let out a small cry of terror. Hesitantly I reached out my right hand and finally touched the slippery flipper. It felt sticky and cold as ice. I felt my hand squeezed tightly.

Wait a moment! How could it be?

He was just a dolphin; he couldn't possibly hold my hand with his flipper, could he? But then what was it that was pulling on my hand?

"Hey, let me go! Let go!" I yelled.

Just before I was pulled into the pool, I could hear the indistinctive shout of the staff and the audience, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw Murata stretch his hand toward me. But the next moment, blue water engulfed me. Although the pool could not be very deep, I sank deeper and deeper into what felt like an abyss. My clothes were completely soaked and became heavy, still wrapping around my arms and legs, pulling me down. Damn it, where's the bottom of the pool?! Wait a minute. Hadn't I been through something similar before? Twice?

"Not again!"

I was sucked backward into the depths. I swallowed a tremendous amount of water. It was really physically impossible... biologically and architecturally as well. My back ought to have hit the hard cement. Unless David Copperfield had his hands in the game. Or Princess Tenko¹!

"Tell me, Mama..."

"What, Yuu-chan?"

"Why are people so fond of playing with dolphins? It's stupid."

"But they're cute! Don't you love dolphins?"

"Well, not at all. You never know what goes on in their heads. They might shake hands with us and swim around us amicably, but what if they are secretly mocking us? What if they actually look down upon us and think to themselves "Let's have some fun with these little humans"?"

"Ah! I got it! You can't get along with those you can't understand. But that's why, for Mama, it is important that you work toward that understanding. Friendship needs time to grow and blossom. Spending time together, gazing up at the stars while talking to each other, that's how we come to understand one another better. Do you understand what I mean, Yuu-chan?"

Friendship? With dolphins? Thanks, but no thanks.

I looked up to a blazing blue sky dappled with contrasting white shreds. Salt water burnt my eyes. Probably that meant I was floating in the ocean and not in a pool. Listlessly, my body drifted like a jellyfish, slightly rocking back and forth.

The sun was still high in the sky, blindingly bright and intense. The skin on my face and neck felt painful under the summer sun. It reminded me of the summer vacations when I was a child. I had always looked forward to going to the beach with my family; we would have a lot of watermelon, fireworks and collect piles of sea shells.

I'd become somewhat used to waking up in a completely different world, since this had happened to me for the third time in my life. So they summoned me again. Traveling through a whirlpool of water, being dragged here almost against my will, was no longer something new. But I had never expected it to happen in front of such a large audience. I had been lulled into a false sense of security.

Fortunately, I know the final destination of my journey, and I had friends there, so it was not all that bad. The story in broad strokes: the protagonist landed in a strange world of swords and magic and must perform heroic deeds. Plots like this were not at all uncommon. The only thing was that in this story I was not a hero, but the

¹ David Copperfield and Princess Tenko are two magicians. The first is world famous, and the second is well-known in Japanese culture. Her real name was Marie Akos, and she was a singer before she started her career as a magician. She became very famous in the 90's around which time they released a doll in her honor.

Demon King, the enemy's last boss. It took me three months on Earth to accept the situation more calmly.

A gray triangle floated in the water and approached my right leg. It must be one of the dolphins. Poor guy, now I had accidentally dragged an innocent animal to this world. I overcame my fear and held out a hand to him to pat his shiny head. The tips of my fingers touched his forehead lightly. It felt much rougher than the dolphin's flipper, which I had touched during the show.

"Hey, good boy! No wonder you can swim so fast. Ian Thorpe¹ used a swimming suit that mimics the skin of a shark."

Did someone just say shark?

Our eyes met. I found myself looking into the eyes of a shark ... A huge white shark!

I had always disliked sea creatures because you never knew what was going on in their heads. But this time it was totally different! What that animal was thinking at the time was not at all difficult to guess: dinner was served, in the form of a human! With the theme song of the movie "Jaws" as background music.

I gave a little cry and fled with a chaotic mixture of front crawl and dog paddle. Wasn't it called freestyle? Damn. What should I do? Pretend to be dead? No, it worked with bears only. Just ignore him? No, it worked with teachers only. Damn, what was the trick with sharks again? Attack or unconditional surrender?

"Your Majesty, are you all right...? Oh no...!"

From the distance, a familiar voice pierced my ears. An overly showy luxury boat approached, moving at a breakneck speed towards me. In the boat sat the duo who were determined to make Yuri Shibuya an experienced Maou - no matter what it cost.

"How outrageous! A shark dares to approach His Majesty!" Lord Günter Von Kleist paled with anger.

He brandished the oar in his hands wildly, as if to challenge the shark to a duel. His long disheveled gray hair fell on his back; his sparkling lilac eyes were bloodshot; and the very seductive baritone voice was reduced to a hysterical falsetto. No woman could ever resist the beauty of this autocratic teacher, but when it came to me, this epitome of perfection inevitably crumbled into pieces.

Sir Weller's face, however, bore a mixture of calm serenity and a pained smile while watching the "video-clip-of-the-dismemberment" of a small child.

Conrad, how could you do this to me?! Your only baseball companion in this world was about to become fish food!

"Calm down, Günter! Use the rudder to steer closer to His Majesty, try to get close to his head, I'll pull him up."

Conrad took my arm and helped me climb up the boat, which I did with the last bit of my strength. I was drenched, breathless and my heart pounded with fear. Conrad held me steady with ease.

"I'm saved! I was almost eaten by the beast." I gasped.

"Don't worry, Your Majesty! These animals do not attack human."

"That's a shark, Conrad! A huge white shark! And it was about to bite my right leg!"

¹ Ian Thorpe is an Australian swimmer. The national sports in Australia are rugby and swimming. In July 2001 Australia confirmed its dominance by winning six gold medals in different categories in the World Swimming Championships, held in the Japanese in the city of Fukuoka. Perhaps this is the reason why Yuuri knows about Ian Thorpe.

"Sharks are vegetarians, Your Majesty. I'm sure he just wanted to play with you a bit."

Oh yeah, that's right. Most animals in this world behaved very differently than those in ours. I had already noticed that in my last stay.

I left Conrad's arms.

"How many times have I told you not to call me Your Majesty? It was you who gave me the name Yuri."

Sir Conrad Weller was the one who took my soul - when I was still not "me" - on a journey to a strange world called Earth. And on a street in Boston, he had offered to share his taxi ride with my mother when she was going to the hospital to give birth to me, and during that ride, had suggested a name for me: Yuri.

Conrad looked like a young man about twenty years old, but his age was actually five times what he appeared to be, as with all other mazokus here.

The mazokus had long life and great beauty. As Conrad was only half mazoku, he looked a bit plainer than the full-blooded mazokus. All the other mazoku nobles, however, would form a club of "pretty boys." Yet, as their king, I was nothing more than a normal boy whose looks, build and intelligence could only be classified as mediocre. I found myself at a big disadvantage. I could only keep faith in Andersen's fairytale of the ugly duckling and desperately hope that I would one day grow into a beautiful swan. On the other hand, maybe one day I would be able to find a girl, as in "Beauty and the Beast," who would assure me that for mazokus, personality is more important than appearance.

"Damn, it's so hot here!" I groaned.

Summer seemed to be at its peak even in this world. My clothes were all wet but I didn't feel cold. Damp clothes clinging to my skin made me sweat even more. With difficulty I peeled the T-shirt off. When I reached the belt buckle of my pants, my hand scratched against the dolphin key chain. Those stupid dolphins!

Conrad looked at me closely.

"Can it be that your muscles have grown a little?"

"Not just a little! Here, look at my biceps."

I was happy and proud with the result of my fervent daily training. Conrad smiled while looking at my "muscle-of-a-baseball-player" appreciatively.

"Then I'll get you a new sword, one made for adult men."

"I don't need a sword, Conrad."

"Well, but..."

Conrad was interrupted by a long, indefinable cry.

Günter was about to be harassed by a group of sharks. "Geez, these animals are cuddly, but really."

Vegetarian-and-cuddly-sharks. I still hadn't got used to this sort of thing yet.

This was my third stay in this world. And this time I landed at a place completely unknown to me. The white sand and greenish blue water would have made a perfect travel brochure for the Greek Adriatic. Not far from this picturesque backdrop was the Royal House, a summer residence with the architectural style of a castle, but its structure was quite different from the two castles where I had stayed previously.

I was worried that I would have to wear my school uniform in this unbearably hot weather, but fortunately the clothes that the maid brought me were a set of two-piece upper and lower summer clothes in beige color, made of a light material that felt like linen. I put the slightly large pants on. The waistband was a little loose. The maid lowered her head with a fearful look in her eyes. Probably she was worried that she had made a mistake with the clothes and I was going to get angry with her for that.

"Never mind, I can wear a belt and everything will be all right." I tried to cheer her up.

"Your Majesty, have you lost weight? Hopefully it's not your health that..." said the girl.

"No, don't worry. This is just the result of my muscle training. I have even bought a body-building equipment to tone my abs."

I got it for a mere 1000 yen in a discount store! My goal was to get a six-pack abs like Kamen-Rider¹. As I fumbled to pull my belt off from the wet pants, Günter entered the room and ran to the corner where I was.

"One moment, Your Majesty, I will make sure you can enjoy a pleasant temperature."

In a world of magic and swords, of course electricity or household appliances wouldn't exist. But despite the lack of air conditioning, the further one went into this stone house, the cooler it became. Once I took off my shoes and socks and stepped on the stone floor, I felt coldness penetrating the soles of my feet.

However, before I could assure him that it wasn't so hot, Günter had already made a gesture with his right hand. An attendant gracefully stepped forward, his hand holding a large duck by its neck. The tortured duck flapped his wings with all his might. Aha, I got the idea! And indeed, the air felt cooler, only the breeze stank of poultry, and I felt terrible for the animal.

"Please stop!" I hurriedly said. "This is an act of cruelty against animals... And it is cool enough in here anyway!"

"Oh, the compassion of His Majesty has no limits! His kind heart feels for even these insignificant creatures! This is our Majesty, the 27th Maou of our Kingdom: 'Glory to the Mighty Shinou and his people, the mazokus! Never let it be forgotten that our people, the mazokus, have existed since the dawn of the world! Our strength, wisdom and courage have once forced even the Creator Gods to kneel! The mazokus will prosper in this kingdom for all eternity!"

That was the lengthy name of our country. Or, in short: Shin Makoku.

While he talked, his hands moved beautifully in perfect choreography.

"Your Majesty, I have deliberately inserted a mistake. Can you tell which part of the name was incorrect?"

"Uh... Sorry, I... uh... was not paying attention." I stammered.

The beautiful man looked disappointed.

"Really, Your Majesty, I must earnestly request you to spend more time here and learn more about the country, its people, and the basics of our diplomatic relations. You should no longer return to the other world. Your Günter would like to remain by your side forever."

¹ Kamen Rider is a hero of a Japanese series/franchise who rides a motorcycle and wears a suit with a helmet that looks like a grasshopper. His name means 'masked motorcyclist' literally, and his costume is different in each seasons of the series. But his muscles are always emphasized, especially the abs to which Yuuri refers.

The situation was clearly straying from the right track. But Conrad, who had ushered out the fanning duck, beautifully and effortlessly turned it around again. He always knew how to handle tricky situations. There were many things I could learn from him, for example, how to deal with Günter. With an attitude as calm and composed as usual, he said:

"Günter, haven't I told you already? We have no exclusive right to His Majesty. He is also very important to Earth and Japan."

If I was really that important, then why had I been a mere bench-warmer for the past three years?

"Günter! What is the meaning of this?" A voice bellowed. The thundering footsteps that were rapidly approaching sounded extremely intimidating.

"Why was my brother the only one who went to pick Yuri up?! Without informing me! I will not let you treat me like a fool! As his fiancé, I have the right..."

The one who barged in was the angel-like bishounen, Wolfram von Bielefeld. He stopped dead in the hallway upon seeing my naked torso, and seemed to be at a loss for words, his cute face flustered.

"Yuri... my God! Your face and arms ... So dark! Have you caught a terrible disease? Or a curse?"

"Are you looking for a fight?" I sulked.

In fact, my face and my arms were well-tanned, but my torso and legs were still white as snow. For baseball players, having this shirt-like tan would be considered an achievement, but when my upper body was exposed like this, it was indeed not the best look.

With the thumb and forefinger, Wolfram pinched my cheek.

"Ow-ow-aie-ooh-aie!! What do you think you're doing?"

He looking directly at Conrad and asked.

"Is he real?"

Conrad nodded.

"But if this is Yuri, who is the one my older brother went to pick up?"

"Probably an impostor."

When Wolfram mentioned his big brother, it would not be Conrad who was in front of him, but his other older brother, Lord Gwendal von Voltaire.

Conrad, Wolfram and Gwendal were half-brothers, sharing the same mother. Until recently they were Their Royal Highnesses, the mazoku princes. But when their mother the former Maou stepped down and I had to take over, the three brothers became Their Excellencies, the former princes.

Wolfram was a rival-less super bishounen, like a Vienna choir boy who had jumped straight out of a shoujo manga. He had inherited his mother's shiny golden hair and her emerald green eyes. While his build was no better or worse than mine, the difference between our looks was as wide as the gap between heaven and earth. I

imagined all artists in the world would fight over the chance to paint his portrait. If he had appeared in someone's dream, the dreamer might even be moved to tears thinking they had seen an angel. However, he was angel-like only as long as he kept his mouth shut. Else he was just a terribly spoiled and bratty prince. As he claimed, and if one could believe his words, he was already eighty-two years old. If he was living in Japan, he would be a stubborn old man. And because of a small tiny minor cultural difference, we were engaged to each other.

Lady Cecilie von Spitzweg was the mother of the three brothers as well as the former Maou - who insisted that we call her "Cheri." Her love for men extended beyond the barrier between different species, as she happily declared. The son of her union with a human of unknown origin was the half-blooded Conrad. Maybe it was because of his human DNA that Conrad's features were not as captivating as the other mazokus. However his face with a cheeky smile and a thin scar across one eyebrow could still be described as attractive. Had he lived in the United States, he would probably have become a model for the GI Joe¹. No one looked as good as Conrad in a military uniform.

"Wolfram, take your hands off His Majesty at once!" Günter admonished him in an upset tone, and pulled the younger ex-prince's fingers away from my deformed cheeks. "I'll never forgive you if there should be even one small fingerprint on that beautiful face!"

I could never understand the mazokus' standards of beauty, given that Günter seriously believed I was more beautiful than all the mazokus, including himself.

Black hair and eyes were extremely rare around here, and that rarity gave it a great value.

"What is really going on here? What impostor are you talking about? Why should I not be 'me'?"

"While you were away, a brazen man pretended to be you and committed crimes under your name." Günter said.

"Incredible! Someone claimed to be "Yuri Shibuya"?"

"Not exactly so, Your Majesty. In Suveria, the southern country near Conashia, a criminal was caught posing as the Maou. We ignored this at first because we believed it couldn't have been you. But now that the execution date has been announced, we all felt a bit uneasy. As long as we couldn't say with absolute certainty whether that criminal was Your Majesty or not..."

Conrad interrupted him.

"We could not exclude the possibility that Your Majesty had come to our world outside the country and without our knowledge. We had to clarify the actual circumstances. This was also the reason why we called you back this time."

"Sure, sure...! And because of that, I fell into the pool while shaking hand with Bando, and ended up floating next to a shark in the ocean..."

"Bando? Who is Bando? Another guy?" Wolfram growled unhappily.

"I don't know if Bando is male or female! Besides, Bando is just a dolphin."

I turned back to Conrad and Günter. "So now that I am here in front of you, I'm the proof that the other guy couldn't have been me."

¹ G.I. Joe is a line of action figures produced by the toy company Hasbro. The initial product offering represented four of the branches of the U.S. armed forces with the Soldier (Army), Action Sailor (Navy), Action Pilot (Air Force) and Action Marine (Marines). The term G.I. stands for Government Issue and became a generic term for U.S. soldiers (predating the action figures), especially ground forces. The development of G.I. Joe led to the coining of the term "action figure". (from Wikipedia)

"That's right, Your Majesty! Your wisdom always delights me."

Now that wasn't a difficult one to figure out. With Günter slopping all over me, I badly wished I could indeed be somewhere else at that moment.

So in a foreign country, an impostor had claimed to be me, and had painted the town red. How bold! As far as I knew, only Master Mito Komon¹, the Bold Shogun, or Michael Jackson had been impersonated. For the celebrities or deities, it is inevitable that there would be cheap imitations. Then wasn't an impostor the best way to prove that my fame had elevated?

"But, why do you want to go to look for my double? The fact that I'm here would clear all doubts, right? And why would Gwendal himself take the trouble...?" I trailed off. Suddenly I could imagine the figure of the eldest brother in front of my eyes.

"You are right. Of course, Your Majesty, we wouldn't really care if a crazy man who impersonated you would die on the scaffold. But this ... what is the word he used?"

"Double."

"Yes, we have received information that this double is in possession of a special item that only the Maou can handle. This is an extremely precious treasure to the mazokus. It was taken out of the country two hundred years ago and has since disappeared. If this information is correct, we need to bring the treasure back, to revive our power. Twenty years ago we sent a man, a relative of Gwendal, to look for it."

"What was his name again?" Asked Conrad.

"Lord Grisela, Lord Gegenhuber Grisela."

"Ah, yes, exactly, this Huber."

Conrad tugged his ear uncomfortably. Although he was kind and pleasant by nature, even he did not seem to get along with everybody. I turned to the younger brother, trying to find out some information about this Huber.

"Who's that?" I asked.

"He is the cousin of my brother from his father's side. An aunt from the Voltaire family has married into the Griesela family."

"Oh." I mumbled, a little bit disappointed. I was hoping for something more dramatic. "So no one else can touch this treasure? Does it bite, burn, or spit on you?"

I was vividly reminded of my encounter with the Maken Morgif, who had done all that.

"Not exactly, Your Majesty. Anyone could possibly touch this treasure. But in this world, only you can play it."

"Play it?"

"The Mateki, Your Majesty."

¹ Mito Kōmon is the longest-running and most famous historical drama series (jidaigeki) in Japan with over 1000 episodes, which began broadcasting on Aug. 4, 1969. Its main character is based on the historic Tokugawa Mitsukuni, former vice-shogun and retired second daimyo of the Mito domain. In the guise of Mitsuemon, a retired crêpe merchant from Echigo, he roams the realm with two samurai retainers, fun-loving Sasaki Sukesaburō (Suke-san) and studious Atsumi Kakunoshin (Kaku-san). Episodes typically conclude with a brawl in which the unarmed, disguised protagonists better a crowd of samurai and gangsters, culminating with the presentation of the inrō that reveals the hero's identity. (from Wikipedia) Mitsuemon is the nick name that Yuuri used when he traveled incognito with Conrad and Wolfram to retrieve the Maken Morgif.

"The Mateki?!" Wolfram cried excitedly. "I've only heard the stories about it from my father. He said that the sound of the flute is fantastic! One note from the flute and the sky roars with thunders, the earth shakes, the sea rages! Allegedly, the flute has the power to conjure a formidable storm!"

As I had immediately imagined a flute with a clear sound or a piccolo, I forced myself to revise my picture of the Mateki. Maybe it was a kind of conch?

"I've always wanted to hear the sound of the Mateki. I can't wait! I'm curious to see how well Yuri can play it." Wolfram said cheerfully.

"Playing the flute?! Me?! Are you kidding?! Get that idea right out of your head!"

Arms folded on his chest, Conrad had leaned against the wall and was listening to the conversation, as usual.

"I strongly doubt that the people of Suveria will do us a favor and show us the possessions of the executed criminal in his coffin."

"You think they would confiscate all his belongings? Wait a minute, his coffin...? Are they really going to execute my double?! What has he done?"

"If I'm not mistaken, he ran away without paying the bill."

"Death sentence for eating and running without paying the bill?!"

Wow, blow me down! My double was going to be executed for failing to pay for his food! You might not like such a person, but you can't kill him! That would be a scandal! I had to stop that!

"We must save him, Conrad!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"We have to save my double!"

Chapter 2

"What is this child doing here?" Lord Gwendal von Voltaire turned to his two half brothers with an obvious expression of displeasure. His hair was long and of a very dark gray color; his eyes were blue, with a permanent look of bad humor in them which no beauty could get rid of. In my opinion, Gwendal was born to be the Maou, worthier than anyone else. His deep voice was chilling to the bone.

I felt glad that my brother wasn't like that; otherwise years ago I would have run away from home. At this point, I had to take my hat off to Wolfram. He professed deep affection for this man.

"His Majesty intends to explain that the prisoner Suveria is holding captive is a fake." Conrad cheerfully said, trying to help me out. Unfortunately, at that moment I had hooked one foot in the saddle and was hanging writhingly against the horse's belly.

"Ah! Really?" Gwendal growled. He had been waiting for us near the south border.

"Exactly!" I said hastily. "You probably already knew he was a fake, and so you thought it would be fine even if they go ahead and execute him. The only thing is, the prisoner isn't me, I'm perfectly fine, I've returned and I will not allow him to be executed! So let's get to Conansia or Cavrella or where ever the double and the Mateki are!"

"Conrad..."

"Yes?"

With the slightly raised eyebrow, Gwendal stared sharply at his brother, the one he held in high esteem as a soldier.

"Please do me a favor and take these two back to the capital!" He growled again.

"What?! Me too?!" Wolfram exclaimed indignantly.

The younger brother apparently did not think he should be treated the same way as me.

"I only obey orders from his Majesty." Conrad said smoothly.

Wow, don't say such things so easily, else it'll go to my head and I'll end up believing myself all high and mighty. There is no way freshly crowned newbie Maou, and ordinary baseball kid (forever a bench-warmer) like me could be a great person.

"Okay, do whatever you want!" Gwendal grumbled, and turned his horse toward the river that ran along the border. The men in his troop followed, halting just enough to pay us respect.

I had the honor of sitting behind a stunningly beautiful young boy on the horse and looked up toward heaven. Everyone wore dresses like in the movie Lawrence of Arabia¹ -- white cloaks to protect from the scorching sun, because we were riding through endless sand dunes of a desert. Safety measures against heat strokes are crucial when travelling through even a short stretch of desert.

"Inconceivable! You may have a heat stroke!" Günter hugged me tightly while fighting back tears. Holding onto my right hand, he implored.

¹ 'Lawrence of Arabia' is a 1962 British epic film based on the life of T. E. Lawrence. The film depicts Lawrence's experiences in Arabia during World War I, in particular his involvement in the rebellion against the Turks. The film was nominated for ten Oscars at the 35th Academy Awards, and won seven, including Best Picture (from Wikipedia). Here Yuuri mentions the typical Arab dress with turban and long white robe covering the whole body as shown in the movie.

"It's not just the heat. A few years ago, Suberera was in a civil war. Since then the gap between rich and poor people has become large, and public safety is now in a miserable state. On the other hand, in the last two years there has been an unprecedented drought, everywhere people struggle for food. Please stay here, Your Majesty! Gwendal will take care of the magic flute! Instead, go with me, his faithful Günter, to the beach to enjoy the summer."

It was difficult to assuage Gunter's worries, because the snot dangling from his slender nose kept distracting me. As nothing could commence before we persuaded him, I reassured Gunter that getting acquainted with one's neighbors was the first step in friendship, and that first hand experience was important in learning diplomacy. My presentation moved Gunter into a fit of exclamations.

"That is so noble of you, Your Majesty!"

Ha, that's 1 point to Yuuri Shibuya. Finally, I'm getting the hang of persuading Lord von Kleist.

I had dyed my hair and put on contact lenses to hide my black eyes for this trip just as I had done for the previous one.

We had reached the edge of a parched river separating Shin Makoku from the country Conashia. The river had completely dried up in what was called a "record drought." The cracked riverbed was about a kilometer wide. There was no comparison with the Tone River¹ near my home...

"It'd be an amazing sight, if only there was water" I said.

"During the Civil War, lots of corpses would drift and land on the river bank on our side. But as the humans were afraid of setting foot on our territory, so no one came to collect the dead. We had to take care of those ourselves." Wolfram said.

"That... wasn't the kind of amazing sight I meant."

When we crossed the riverbed, we arrived at a simple picket fence. There were soldiers all around; their number was considerably higher than ours.

It was understandable that the borders should be well protected, but the mazokus had never invaded their neighbors, yet I found their soldiers openly hostile against us. Their spears pointed directly to us. Some standing in the back row pressed the back of their hands to their chins.

"What are they doing?" I wondered.

Wolfram clucked his tongue.

"A malicious act against the mazokus. Although humans are actually scared their pants off by the mazokus, they feel safer as a group, and they become insolent. Nasty creatures!"

"Eh, sorry bout that." I muttered.

"Stop feeling defensive! You are not human but a mazoku! Accept that already!"

Eh, sorry about that, too.

¹ The Tone River is the widest in Japan (16 840 km²), and the second longest in the country with 322 km in length.

At the south of Shin Makoku was the territory of the Karbelnikoff. It was a popular vacation destination, famous for its white sand beaches and dry climate. Many tourists from the northern regions of Shin Makoku come here to quench their need for the sunny weather.

On the other side of the river, Suberera had suffered heavy losses of harvests due to the drought. But for the people of Karbelnikoff, whose main source of income was tourism, the motto was: More sun, more customers.

Lord Günter Von Christ was staying in the Maou's resort complex, completely exhausted, as if the heat had finished him off also.

"He's gone." He sighed.

His long gray hair had lost its luster and fell all over his back in a mess, and his violet eyes were desolate and empty. With a loose lock of hair clinging to his cheek, Günter's tragic appearance looked like that of an exhausted homemaker whose energy has been completely spent on cleaning tasks. He stared absently through the window into the sky and sea.

"Why did His Majesty leave me here all alone? Has it finally come to the day he despises his faithful Günter?"

"It is entirely possible."

Startled, von Lord Christ raised his head.

In front of him was the body of a woman, full of exuberance, wrapped in a tight summer dress, or was it just a swimsuit?

The long golden curls reaching up to her hip were gathered to generously reveal an erotic waist under the summer dress. If one could look pass this exhibition so dazzlingly sexy, her innocently smiling lips, her white skin, and her emerald green eyes hidden behind long eyelashes would remind one of her youngest son.

She did not look more than thirty years old, but in fact she had lived longer than the sisters Kin and Gin¹, the oldest twins in Japan.

Lady Cecilie von Spitzberg was the mother of the three mazoku brothers who didn't look one bit alike, as well as the previous mazoku queen. She was not only a sexy queen, but also a genuine certified queen, my very predecessor.

"Your Royal Highness the Former Queen! What a bold outfit...!"

"And it doesn't look good on me, my dear Gunter? I was told that His Majesty had arrived. If I had known that I would find only you here, I would have kept my legs covered."

"Cheri-sama, I humbly ask you to refrain from these constant attempts to seduce His Majesty."

"But Günter, you're just the same as you've been sniffing the clothes of His Majesty all this while."

"W... Well, that's..."

Madame Cheri snatched the arms of a T-shirt Lord Von Christ had been holding.

"It's very rude of you to keep all the prizes for yourself. Let me hold it too....hm?"

¹ Kin Narita and Gin Kanie, the twin sisters from Japan who were record-setting in terms of their longevity, who reached 107 and 108 years of age. Their names mean "Gold and Silver," respectively.

She held the damp cotton cloth to her nose and sniffed.

"Is this really the scent of his majesty? Don't you wonder Günter? He seems to be such a sweet person."

"That scent actually befits a young man. A distinctive aroma of ... how shall I say? ... ocean air."

Most likely, the odor is from the dolphin... not from Yuuri.

From the hot saddle,

The sweat drips.

It is not just the sun.

A horse, two bodies... close together.

No, the verse did not help much against the heat. No haiku can alleviate this exasperating heat.

We were in the middle of the desert, with nothing within sight but endless rolling sand dunes.

I tried to shift my body away from the boy sitting in front of me as much as possible so that some air could pass through between us. However, it was nothing but hot air all around us, and there was no stir even remotely resembling a breeze.

"If you slip further back, you'll fall." Wolfram said.

"I'm dying of heat!" I complained.

Wolfram was obviously enjoying the situation.

Yes, thanks. Very funny. If only it had been a girl who was sitting in front of me, then I would have had my fun. Like a charming gentleman, I would have steadied her, with the reins held in my hands. Sadly for me, the front seat was occupied by a bishounen lovelier than a girl.

Our crew, consisting of twenty men, was crossing the desert under the sun instead of the moon, and on horses bred by humans instead of camels.

The soldiers at the borders who gestured rudely at us had claimed that animals must be kept quarantined for 20 days before allowed entry into the country. Coming from a modern society in Japan, their claim made sense, but according to Wolfram and his subordinates it was merely petty faultfinding. We ended up sending back the mazoku's horses (they have two hearts) and bought local horses at a border village near Conanshia. It would have been more convenient if they had cars for rent, but it wasn't like I had a license anyway.

This endless sienna arid region was supposedly not as big as a true desert. Born in Boston and brought up in Saitama¹, even though I can tell apart artificial grass fields from the real grass fields, I had no idea what was the difference between a desert and sand dunes.

Nor had I ever been in the mini desert in Tottori², Japan.

1 Boston is located on the east coast of the United States, one of the oldest cities in the country, and one of the most populated today. Saitama Prefecture of Japan is located north of Tokyo, more or less at the center of the country.

2 Tottori Prefecture in Japan is the least populated in the country and is located to the southwest. The small desert Yuri mentioned is a sandy desert 2km wide by 16km long, which has up to one small oasis in the middle.

Gwendal rode a distance away in front of us. The cloak on his back moved in a wavelike motion in the air like seaweed in a lake. I turned toward Conrad and lamented.

"Damn, why is no one else but me suffering so much from the heat?"

"It's probably because of our training." Conrad replied, looking extremely fresh and relaxed.

They didn't even sweat that much.

That was probably expected. After all, it was easier for well-trained soldiers, assuming that they trained hard everyday under the supervision of an evil sergeant.

Like the armed forces of the Japanese self defense. They presumably traveled through forests and mountains, crossing swamps and building igloos in the snow. Maybe even stumbling everyday in forests where the trees were thick and the ground could suddenly slide. But this was more of a training routine for a Ninja.

In any case, among all travelers, I was the only one who was dying of the heat. And then I even saw hallucinations.

"Do you also see over there in the middle of the sand a small animal raising its arms?"

"What? Where? What small animal? I can't see anything." Wolfram said.

I could see the head of an animal unknown to me sticking out from a hole about ten meters away. Bu no one would expect such an animal in the middle of the desert.

A soldier on a dark brown horse disappeared right in front of me. The gray horse Wolfram and I were riding suddenly flexed, lost his balance and sank.

"Yikes, what's happening now?!" I cried.

"A sand bear!"

A sand bear?! Everything became fuzzy around me, and the whole world turned into the color of gold and orange. Here and there helmets, or a forearm, came into my sight. We sank deeper and deeper into the smooth sand. There was no escape. We were being inevitably sucked in.

"Wh... what happens?! How can this be?!"

When I opened my mouth, sand immediately filled between my teeth. I tried to hold Wolfram back by the hem of his robe, but his arms, legs, hands and finally even his face disappeared. I could barely breathe.

What kind of animal could this be?! In my field of vision, which was becoming blurred, I could see a huge two-toned panda moved his arms up and down at the center of a whirling mass of sand.

"That's a damned panda!" I cried.

A panda in the middle of a desert. With a new variation of color too: his coat was of beige and brown. Where did you leave your bamboo?



Suddenly someone grabbed my arm firmly, freeing me from my immersion into this giant sand hour glass. "Conrad..."

No, that could not be Conrad. My indestructible protector was supporting my legs from below with his shoulders.

When I looked up I saw Gwendal standing right on the edge of the hole. Wolfram and the other soldiers had been sucked into the vortex. I saw only a few horses' legs and someone's hands that I could not recognize. The sand kept swirling down the center of the vortex.

"What about Wolfram?! He fell in front of me into the sand! But he won't die, right?!" I cried and wailed.

"If he was unlucky..." Gwendal said above me.

"Don't worry, if he's not suffocated he'll find his way back to the surface." Conrad reassured me. "Your Majesty, climb up quickly!"

"But we have to go back to help! We don't know if he has a chance against the bear!" I protested.

I tried to slide down the slope, but Gwendal held my arm tightly and would not let me go.

"You cannot help!" He reproached me.

"But I can't just leave him like that! Then at least you go and save him, he is your brother! Go and save him instead!"

I turned to Conrad. "Hey, you can deal with that bear, can't you? You are a sword master! Surely you can deal with a middle-stage boss character?" I appealed while being dragged up. Though it was in order to steady his feet, he avoided my eyes.

"The top priority now is your security." He looked up and panted, still trying to push upward.

"But I'm fine, so..."

"No!"

For a split second, his eyes, brown with flecks of silver, met mine. Conrad bit his lips, frowned, a scar barely noticeable on an eyebrow, and then spoke with tormented voice. He turned towards the center of the vortex.

"Your Majesty, Wolfram would agree with me immediately. He is also a grownup warrior and knows that things like this can happen. Your safety comes first!"

"But-!"

By now, there was no visible trace of the soldiers who had been swallowed by the sand vortex. Would they pass off falling into such a land hole as a matter of bad luck? Just imagining the honey blond hair and brilliant emerald green eyes, frozen with terror, hurt my chest; I couldn't breathe. Of course twenty lives would weigh more than one, even if it was my own life that was at risk. Go and save those twenty people, rather than staying here for me. The choice is straightforward. No one should be sacrificed, even for a king!

"Conrad, I don't want you to be someone who abandon his own brother." I finally said.

"Your Majesty... we must leave this place immediately. Everything can collapse any moment now."

I reached up and got to the solid ground. Finally the sand under my feet felt solid and stable. I turned to Conrad:

"You've said that you would only follow my orders." I said.

"Yes, but that was..."

"You said you'll follow my catcher's signs. Then I order you to save Wolfram. Please! I'm fine; you have no reason to worry about me. After all I still have a strong guard here."

Conrad looked surprised and shifted his eyes back and forth between me and Gwendal

"Any order?" He finally turned to Gwendal and murmured. "Okay. But you take care of him!"

"Mhmmm." Gwendal grumbled.

He was standing behind me so I could not see his face, but I thought I heard a bit of relief in his voice. Confidence grew in me that my decision could not have been wrong.

Conrad slid down the slippery slope, to rescue his brother and subordinates.

"Do you know how to find the hidden tunnel out of that beast's den?!" Shouted Gwendal a moment later.

"No need to worry, this is the third time I have had to deal with a sand bear! See you at the capital!"

Yes, my decision was correct. It has to be.

Chapter 4

If His Majesty saw me in this embarrassing state, what would he say?

Trying to remember his master's smile with a brain almost numb with exhaustion, a beauty who could earn a fortune with just a flirtatious glance has one arm thrust into a barrel filled with water as he watches the laundry spin around.

"Lady Anissina."

"What?"

Günter raised a small voice in complaint to the female inventor who was standing by in a 'scholarly' way with her arms folded, making no effort to help at all.

"This is difficult."

"Of course. Tibby needs a bit of hard work."

"Um, just what country's language is this 'Tibby' from?"

"It's an abbreviation for 'To Invent Better, I use Your Body'"

If you abbreviate it like that, it comes out 'Tibyb.'¹

But I knew it, I knew it, I knew it – I'm a guinea pig! The reason Gwendal avoided his childhood friend was because he didn't want to be experimented on. I can understand why he makes such a bitter face just from hearing her name if this is what he goes through all the time.

But it's too late. Günter is now under her control.

"However, as far as I can see, I can't imagine this being anything than just a machine that's using my power to spin around the water and clothes... how is this a new invention?"

"In order for the cloth to not get tangled, I've put to use a theory of including an agitator. Although judging from your fatigue, it seems this totally automatic magic washing machine uses too much demon power. In this age where we demons will conserve energy, it seems this..."

Her eyes flashed brightly.

"Is a failure!"

Not-Mad-Scientist-but-Mad-Magicalist Anissina von Karbelnikoff.

Please say that sooner.

¹ Original Japanese abbreviation was 'Monitaa' which is the word for computer monitor. -> "Motto ii mono tsukuru tame **ni**, anata no karada de **tameshitai**." (In order to create better things, I want to test them with your body.) Then Günter thought, "however you try to abbreviate that, it comes out 'Moniata'" which would be like saying 'moniort' in English.

I have no memory of it, but two times in the past I've put on display some awesome magic. Magic so strong, even Magi Shirou¹ would turn pale. The first time was related to rain, the second time was with bones. If that's true, then that would make this common, first-year student from a prefectural high school a natural born magician. So then can't I do something about this situation I've been cornered into?

While being forced into a camp-for-two out in the wilderness half a day away from Svelera's capitol, I held my knees and muttered.

"If only I'd been taught some sort of spell or something..."

In the dry air and under the starlit sky, I figured I'd at least try chanting something, but the horse just got scared and ran away. We've advanced one step closer to total adversity. Gwendal only saw the horse off with a cold gaze and didn't laugh or even try to run after it. He's not surprised by stupid occurrences anymore.

The way to the capital was desert-like, but, with its rocks, cacti and dry grasses, it seemed more fit for cowboy hats than Lawrence of Arabia-type clothes. If I had to compare it to somewhere on Earth, I'd point at Arizona.

In the shade of a rock, we crouched down and lit a fire: that was the end of our camping preparations. We don't have a tent or sleeping bags. We don't have any curry with potatoes or a roaring camp fire either. After a dinner of dried meat and water, I laid down because I had nothing better to do. I haven't spoken with anyone for a while. I feel like I'm going to forget how to talk soon.

Ah, the moon is blue, the stars are white. It's cold even if I go right up next to the fire.

As I was starting to fall asleep – from the cold rather than drowsiness – I felt something itchy near my stomach. Thinking it was a scorpion or a rattlesnake, I reflexively jumped awake and above me...

"... ah..."

Gwendal was hovering over top of me.

We were both speechless.

Lowering my gaze slowly, I saw the eldest son's fingers hooked on my belt.

No way!?

"Are even you thinking that I-I-I might be a girl and in order to check are unhooking, unhooking my-"

"Wait."

"How can I just wait! Uwah this is an unbelievably huge shock! I've lived my life honestly for 16 years and then I come here and people think I'm a girl! Even though when I was in the boy's bath on my school trip, I wasn't that different from the average size!"

"Wait, calm down. I'm not doubting your gender and I don't think you look like a girl."

The gap between his eyes and eyebrows is larger than usual. It seems he's a bit flustered.

"... That's right, yeah? Whatever angle you look at me, I'm just a normal guy, right?"

"Yeah."

¹ Magi Shirou is a Japanese magician. Well, it could also be spelled Maggie or McGee, but I've yet to see the man's name written in the English alphabet.

“My face, my voice, the way I move, the way I talk and the way I eat are all masculine right?”

“Without a doubt.”

Since he’s not the type to be kind with his words, I guess I can believe in his affirmation. That’s a little comforting.

“... Then why were you trying to unfasten my belt..? Ah! Don’t tell me you’ve got the same hobbies as your little brother and were looking for a fight!?”¹

“No!”

He waves his right hand in front of his face in a move unlike him. Of course, the movement lifts my left hand up and it gets waved around with the chain.

“Owowow, that hurts!”

“Ah, sorry.”

Timidly looking down, I saw that his long fingers weren’t holding my belt, but the swaying blue ornament.

“... Ah, I see. Bando-kun. You should have said so from the beginning.”

It seems this man with a deep bass voice and an aggressive face had an unexpected love for small and cute things. I’d only half believed it when I heard it, but judging from the interest he had for the dolphin keychain hanging from my belt buckle, it appears the information was true. When I unhook it and hold it out to him, the flame reflects off of the round blue eyes of the swimming mammal.

“I’ll give it to you.”

Gwendal softly grasps the acrylic as if he was receiving an expensive jewel.

“... Is that alright?”

“It’s fine. I don’t really like them anyway. I can never tell what they’re thinking.”

With those beady eyes, half-opened mouth, short body and heart shaped fins.

“What’s his name?”

“Bando-kun... or Eiji-kun.”

They’re even scarier in person.

“Hey.”

I called my travelling companion’s name as I looked up at the sky, thinking that now we won’t be like graffiti compared to the Petit Julien and we can have a talk on equal terms. Gwendal von Voltaire, the unlucky demon chained to me with handcuffs.

“Gwendal, I’ve been meaning to ask, but will Conrad and Wolfram and the soldiers all really able to get out of there? And even before that, how come I was the only one who could see the new-color-variation panda? And then, while I do feel it’s my fault we ended up in handcuffs, how come we haven’t even tried to break the chains

¹ I’m taking a wild guess that this is referring to the pseudo-sumo match in the first book where Yuuri started to take his clothes off.

with all these handy rocks along the way? If we really smash it, we might be able to do something.”

“You want me to answer all of that?”

“... If you can.”

Even though the gift put him in a better mood, I’m still a coward.

“Fine. Starting with the sand bear, I can’t say that we didn’t let our guard down. But in reality, sand bears don’t live in small sand dunes. Which means it’s possible that those humans in Svelera have forcibly placed them there on their country’s border in order to prevent travel back and forth. I can’t say exactly as to whether they’ve just been left there from the civil war or if they’re there to stop smuggling. Actually, a few years ago esoteric stones were discovered in Svelera. Thaumaturges from neighboring countries want them so bad they practically have arms coming out of their throats. Black market dealers wouldn’t let that opportunity pass them by. In order to prevent their precious esoteric stones from being taken out of the country, they’ve probably placed dangerous traps along the border.”

Even though pandas are an endangered species on Earth, they’re just part of a trap here.

“Furthermore, this land’s history of war is long. In other words, their thaumaturgy has been developed just as long.”

“Hey wait, what’s thaumaturgy? What’s the difference between magic and thaumaturgy?”

Probably because this is more suited to a teacher of some sort, the wrinkles between Gwendal’s eyes gathered together. But the effects of the dolphin are tremendous and he doesn’t attempt to end the conversation.

“Magic is an ability only the demons have. Magic power is determined by the quality of the soul you are born with, so ultimately only those with the soul of a demon can use it. Conversely, thaumaturgy¹ is a technique those humans have received by praying to their gods. Even those born without talent or exorcism abilities can train themselves to be able to use it. Esoteric stones supplement people’s abilities and even those without any ability can use their power. Because there aren’t many countries where they’ve been discovered, they sell for quite a high price.”

“So, in order to protect the outflow of those precious resources, they’ve laid traps along the border...”

“It seems so. As for why you were the only one who could see the sand bear, it’s likely because the deception of the thaumaturgy had no effect on you. I don’t know why, but maybe it’s because you’re naturally thickheaded.”

That might be true. Ever since I was a kid I’ve never been able to get hypnotized or have any sort of subliminal message work on me and in my school trip’s group photo, I was the only one who didn’t see the ghost.

“Also, there are esoteric stones imbedded in these handcuffs. Trying to smash them with a rock would just be a waste of energy. It might be possible on the soil of demon lands where there is much of the essence that obeys us, but in this dry human land, trying to defeat thaumaturgy is difficult.”

“No way, we can’t take these off? Then what are we gonna do!”

I imagined the two of us together forever. We’d bathe together and sleep together. In sickness and in health – we’d even be piss-buddies whenever we had to go to the bathroom. I can’t deal with that.

As he examined the keyring, Gwendal spoke in a low and subdued voice.

¹ Thaumaturgy is an awkward word and my spell check doesn’t like it at all, but that’s what ‘houjutsu’ is. It was used by Onmyouji. They had a range of duties, but the one most relevant to KKM is protecting the people from demons and evil spirits.

"I had intended to wait for Conrart and the others to catch up to us in that town back there, but now that this has happened we'll head for the capitol. First we need to find a monk who can use thaumaturgy and get these annoying restraints cut off. Then we can deal with Gegenhuber and the Demon Flute."

Seems like he doesn't want to be piss-buddies either.

"But judging from that, Conrad, Wolfram and the others are okay right? Because it sounds like you think it's obvious we're going to meet up."

"If a soldier as skilled as he was killed by a sand bear, it would be a story for the ages."

"That's amazing. I'd definitely lose if I had to have a sumo match with a panda."

"That's why I pulled you out."

Unable to deal with the fatigue and the cold, I pulled up my knees and curled into a ball and drowsiness immediately assaulted me. I've become a bit more daring to sleep in the middle of Arizona. But that's because there's someone by my side. If I'd been alone, the fear would have thrown me into a panic.

"Hey."

"What?"

"Come closer to conserve the heat."

"... You don't have to say it like having to do so is a misfortune."

As is the ironclad rule at parties conducted while stranded, we sat with our shoulders together. The chains between us made a heavy sound.

"Hey."

"What now?"

"Do you like animals? Like rabbits and cats."

"... I hate orange rabbits. Cats are... well, I like lions... more than cats... the white ones. White lions¹."

With that being the topic of the conversation right before I fell asleep, my dreams for that night were decided.

When the sun was at its highest, we reached the capital as I sang Country Roads in short gasps. Even though we're drenched in sweat from walking for half a day, there aren't any welcome drinks or showers when we arrive. Even so, just being able to take that last step was fine. If this was me a few months ago, I would have given up along the way. I guess that means I've gotten some endurance. My grass-lot baseball spirit is exploding.

Just as we passed through the gate, the weight of the chains returned. I didn't really notice it on the way because it seems my companion was holding them for me.

¹ As much fun as it would be to think this is Conrad related, it's really just baseball again. The mascot for the Seibu Lions is a white lion.

Our fingers are so close, neither of us really knew anymore whether we were tied together with this unromantic chain or if we were just holding hands.

“It would be bad if people saw our chains, huh? They’ll think we’re fugitives.”

“Yeah.”

We skillfully wrapped our chains in a cloth so it looked like we had a bundle hanging between us. I heard a few whispers from a few girls passing by.

“Look look! They’re carrying a package together! How passionate! Oh, but you have to do stuff like that while you still can, right!”

Thank you for your nice reactions. But rather than doing stuff like this while I still can, this is the *only* time I will be doing this!

“Hey, doesn’t it look like we’re in a commercial for dishwashing detergent?”

“I’ve never washed a dish.”

Damn bourgeois!

As may be expected of the heart of the country, the scale of the city is different than the town on the border. The royal palace towered in the south and the traffic of the people was intense. However, the ratio of soldiers was high. The women, children and elderly were left tending the stores as most of the men were soldiers. All of them had the military cut, but it seemed that the colors were different depending on their unit – red, yellow and light brown.

It looked like a conveyor belt of just ikura, sea urchin and tuna salad sushi. Oh, now I’m kinda hungry.

Despite being the middle of the afternoon, the church with the pointed roof was deathly quiet. The tall doors were closed and locked from the inside. I saw the supposedly calm and collected Gwendal readying his long leg. Panicking, I matched his movements and the two of us kicked the door in at the same time.

At that moment, the gazes of everyone inside focused on us. They all froze up like mannequins.

Inside the church chapel, there were about a hundred people seated in attendance. On the other side of the straight course, a man and woman dressed in white and a priest stopped in their movements. He might be a pastor or a reverend.

“G-Gwen... they seem to be in the middle of a wedding...”

“That’s what it seems like. Should we leave?”

“Yeah we should.”

The bride looked gentle in her pure white, sleeveless dress. Because the veil was covering her face, I couldn’t see her look of surprise. Judging by the ikura sushi haircuts I’ve gotten used to seeing, I instantly knew the occupation of the bridegroom. We can’t get in the way of the young couple’s special day.

We take one step away.

“Perfect timing!”

That frivolous person raised their voice the moment our manacled group turned their backs.

“Let’s have this loving pair that has already gone ahead in life give us some words of blessing!”

Huh?

The hand of the elderly pastor-like man suddenly reached toward us and a clerk ran around the benches to hand us a megaphone in place of a mic. Having been swept along with the mood of the ceremony, the guests’ eyes are teary.

And the loving pair being asked to give a speech is us two.

“Loving pair!?”

What does ‘pair’ mean? The parakeets we had in preschool were a male and female set and we called them a pair. The attendees don’t think that we’re a couple bound together by handcuffs, do they? But since we seem to be carrying a bundle, they shouldn’t be able to see the chains.

“You’re passionate enough to be holding hands, right? Please give some advice to these young people since you have gotten married one step ahead of them!”

“We’re not married!”

The eldest son and I said that in concert. The pastor exaggeratedly slumped his shoulders and the clerk with the megaphone put it right by our mouths.

“Then, what sort of relationship do you have?”

“This has been my younger brother’s fiancé from the start.”

“EH!?”

Strictly speaking, that’s a bit wrong. At the tall and beautiful brother’s answer, the place got noisy again for another reason.

“With his little brother’s fiancé... that’s all the more passionate.”

“Wha!? N-no! That’s a mis-misunderstanding!”

I feel this is going in a bad direction. Besides, aren’t we both men!?... is the retort that I’ve gotten used to saying, but it doesn’t come out in time.

The bride who was hanging her head slowly raises her face to us. She has a small, unexciting figure. For her, this good day is a once in a lifetime occasion.

That special day shouldn’t be ruined by some guys who barged in like an unlucky accident. It’ll be unforgiveable if we turn around and escape, stepping all over their feelings.

“Um, well...”

It’s been a while since I used a serious voice and my adam’s apple gets stuck in nervousness.

“Well, the important thing in married life is something called ‘the three bags.’”

This is from my father's repertoire of family gathering speeches. Unfortunately, I'm not sure about what comes after that. Gwendal pulls on my arm with a scowl.

"... The first is Baghdad, the second is your emergency bag, and then the third... is um, yeah, gloves which are bags for your hands."

That's weird, I feel like 'mother' was supposed to be in there somewhere. Maybe all three are wrong? ¹

"The third one, gloves, is the most important and you could also say you get slapped with them. Well, I guess you could say that it means that even the so-called fashionable domestic violence going around is hard to forgive..."

The church is completely silent in curiosity and suspense. The young bride holding the fake bouquet has turned her entire body to face us. We're going to make them tired of waiting.

"But gloves are, uh it is said will not fit on another person..."

Everything I'm saying is 77% random words.

The work gloves I used at home come in a set of a dozen and are all identical. Ignoring modern Japan's consumer society, let's make this into a 'kinda cool story' for here.

"So, what I'm saying is that after the wedding, the husband and wife will always be two parts of one whole."

"... That's right."

"That's right... huh?"

Echoing her, I accidentally said that in a girly voice. Who said that just now?

"That's right, isn't it? Once you're together, you absolutely can't be joined with another person. Gloves mean that, right?"

"Mm, uh yeah, except for work gloves."

The bride lifted her head and threw away her veil and bouquet. Panicked, the pastor and clerk did a sort of diving catch. The next brides are you two!

She has tanned skin that looks a bit like wheat and a boyishly short cut. She also has large, resolute eyes of a reddish brown color and eyelashes so long they make her bangs move. Lifting up the hem of her pure white dress, she barrels down the stairs. The groom and the pastor are so astonished they don't move.

"I was wrong."

"Huh, about what?"

"Your words have made me realize it. Thank you."

"You're welcome... but about what?"

"I was about to get married to someone else."

¹ The *real* three bags are 1. Pay envelope (kyuuryoubukuro), 2. Capacity for patience(kanninbukuro), and 3. Mother (ofukuro). All three of these have the Japanese word for bag in them (fukuro/bukuro). Yuuri says Ikebukuro which is a town/ward in Tokyo, emergency bag (hijou mochidashi fukuro) and gloves (tebukuro). I took some artistic liberty and changed Ikebukuro to Baghdad. If you know another city with 'bag' in the name, feel free to imagine it in there ^-^

The elbow poking me in my side suddenly fell in exhaustion and Gwendal gave a low groan of defeat. I hadn't intended to offend the people here by saying something uncalled for.

When she came to stand before us, someone from the attendees recovered from their shock.

"Hey, the bride is escaping!"

Well, using that, let's escape too.

The moment I thought that...

"Please, take me with you."

My free right hand was grabbed. Was my speech that touching?

"They're kidnapping the bride!"

"Huh!?"

Escaping and kidnapping are completely different. If things keep going as they are, we'll be made into real criminals.

Chapter 5

Luckily his hair was short. Lord Conrad Weller thought from the depths of his soul, as he secretly observed his half-brother riding a shaky horse next to him. With each step, fine grains of sand trickled down Wolfram's blond hair which had become dull with dust.

No wonder...

When they had escaped from the sand bear's lair through an air hole, they no longer knew whether they breathed in air or sand. Almost all had survived the quicksand adventure without a scratch. They owed this to the grace of the Original King.

A soldier from Lord von Voltaire's squad came galloping up. Conrad recognized him as the second or third son of a merchant from the south coast. He was not exactly the type of warriors who would gain utmost honor, but he had enough talent to command a squad. Gwendal had taken him as his adjutant. Lord Weller tried to recall his name.

"I came to report to you, Your Excellency!"

"I'm listening."

"I've checked both horses and riders. Some soldiers have suffered burns from the saliva of the sand bears, but they are all minor injuries. None of them is in a critical condition. The horses, however..."

"What about the horses?"

"We now have two horses extra."

"Two more?"

The adjutant scratched his recently grown mustache awkwardly.

Boyd, thought Conrad. His name was Boyd. He was the second son of the wealthy merchant family Boyd.

"Probably the bear kept the horses in its lair as stock for later. They must have joined in with our horses when Your Excellency defeated the beast."

"All right, we should make use of them then. Let them bear a part of our loads. Move some baggage from the tired horses to the new ones."

"Yes, Sir! And there is one more thing..."

"I'm listening..."

"We have a deserter in our ranks."

Conrad frowned and involuntarily lowered his voice.

"Be careful what you say. We are not at war. We won't treat anyone as a deserter. Let's just say the man has left the troop. And? Who is it?"

"It's Ryan from your unit. We have tried to stop him, but he would not listen. He could only stammer incoherently. He had found his fellow sufferer, and he would one day see Your Excellency again in Hildyaard. Can

you understand what that's all about?"

Ryan was known as a fanatical animal lover. He probably wanted to stay with the severely injured sand bear and tame him. He would be the first one ever to tame and train a sand bear.

"Um ... No, but that's okay. There is no need to search for him. I regret that you had to give such an unpleasant report, Boyd. Send two men to the vanguard of the troop. You are now responsible for the security of the expedition."

After the soldier had ridden on to carry out the order, Conrad turned to his neighbor. The youngest brother stared frowning at the ground.

"Come, don't be so depressed."

"Why can't I?"

"Spit out the sand in your mouth first."

"Shut up! You don't understand! Yuri is traveling with my brother ... With my brother! "

"Yeah, and? What is the problem? Are you jealous? Since you're officially his fiancé, you should probably trust him a little more."

"You know yourself how smitten Gwendal is with everything cute! And Yuri is a damn flirty lad. He is not even aware of it himself! "

"And what do you think would..."

Conrad meant to ask how intimate those two could be for Wolfram to consider it a breach of fidelity, but he changed his mind and hastily broke off his question with a cough.

"All that trouble is because of you! I would have come out of the trap on my own. There was no need at all for you to follow me! Do you really have so little faith in my sword?"

"What nonsense," Conrad tried to pacify the fuming blond and, thanks to a century of life experience, found his refreshing smile again. "I know you're an excellent swordsman. I was only thinking about my first encounter with a sand bear. I got into trouble because I did not know his weaknesses. I wanted to show you what it takes. But would you really feel better if I had gone with the other two?"

Wolfram furrowed his brow.

"Just think. Yuri, Gwen and I, the three of us traveling together."

"Right. I'd like it even less!"

"Why haven't you guys understood this yet?! What's so hard about it? A fist is a stone, a flat hand is paper, and two fingers are scissors. The stone loses to the paper, which can be cut up by the scissors, and the scissors would break on the stone, so it loses there. Got it?"

"But a crab has scissors in its claws that would never be able to cut paper," argued the girl.

"Paper would be likely to rip if you wrapped a stone in it," observed Gwendal.

"You two are making me crazy! I've already explained it too many times, dammit!"

With the very first objection I have ever made at a wedding, I had apparently captured the heart of the young bride, so that she begged me to run away with her. The wedding guests did not interpret that to be the bride's idea -- man, would you believe it, they blamed us for forcefully abducting the bride. What complete nonsense!

Gwendal and I already were considered to be an illegally eloped pair, and had already been put in chains. Now in addition to that, kidnapping had been added to our criminal record. So actually, we had advanced up a level as criminals -- not that that was particularly flattering.

"Why me!? We haven't even done anything wrong!" I moaned.

To hide a tree, you need a forest -- to hide a man, you need a crowd. Taking this motto to heart, we ran away to the market square, and thanks to our bundle we were perceived to be customers. [T/N: Gwendal and Yuuri wrapped a blanket around their chain, so it looks like they are carrying a heavy bundle between them]

We were approached by a woman hawking some suspicious looking purple fruit, and by a child who held up a brown frog with long legs. Both objects were purported to have a Viagra-like effect. Just fantastic!

To be truly safe from our pursuers, we needed to find a quiet place to put together a plan for what we were going to do next. In the movies, when the criminals seek refuge in a church, they always find a helpful priest to hide them under a table or some other convenient furniture, but the places of worship in this country had already done poorly by us twice.



I made the following suggestion: Whoever loses at "Rock, Paper, Scissors" must decide where our hiding place should be. But we never got that far, because those two couldn't manage to comprehend the game.

"Okay, fine, we'll just forget that," I finally said, resigned. "Gwendal, you decide. Where should we hide?"

"No, you decide!"

"Dammit, don't do this to me! You get to decide! So come on, where?"

"I don't want to get an earful from you later when you don't like it! You decide!"

"You two are so cute!"

"What the heck is cute about this!" we roared at the bride together, as if from one throat.

We'd been sitting at the front of a pickle store for some time, like gang members more than anything, when a short, bald man approached us. Since he didn't have a sushi haircut, he didn't seem to be a soldier or one of our pursuers.

"Peepee?" he asked us with a rough voice that would have stood him well at the auctions in the market halls at Tsukiji.

Since I didn't have to use the toilet, I was about to decline, when Gwendal spoke up and said, "Yes, peepee."

"What? You never said that you had to..."

"Me too, peepee."

God in heaven, the bride too?! Had it built up in her during all that excitement at the church? She and Gwendal made deadly serious faces.

"Forgive me, I'm really sorry, people! Man, you could have just said something, then we could have taken a potty break long before now!"

The man indicated for us to follow him with a wiggle of his pointer finger. Since Gwendal went on ahead with long strides, I was dragged along. The girl gasped as she saw the chain that flashed out from under the blanket, but she ended up following us as well.

The man's bald head teetered back and forth as he hobbled on. Probably he had a bad leg, I thought. We made turn after turn in the labyrinth of countless narrow alleyways.

So much effort, just to find a toilet!

After we'd passed a bunch of identical looking houses, the bald man knocked on a light brown door. A child's face peeked out from behind the door -- he looked to be about six years old.

"We've got guests," said the man.

After the young boy had ushered us in, he closed the door quickly and turned the key. Then he lowered the blinds on the windows, too. We were being locked in!

On an old but sturdy-looking table, there stood an empty vase. But where in the world was the toilet?

"I'm Shas, and this is my grandson Jilda." The grandfather had a crotchety face, but Jilda looked extremely cute with his light brown, curly hair and blue eyes. The two looked absolutely nothing alike.

"One of you is without doubt a demon," said Shas. "But what does a bride want with an eloped couple?"

"So it's true after all! I knew it!" exclaimed the girl.

"No, dammit!" How often did I have to say it, to hell with it all!

"The blood of the demons also runs in your grandson," said Gwendal quietly to Shas.

"That's right. During the civil war, my only daughter fell in love with a demon who traveled from place to place as a messenger. He was a respectable, decent fellow. I would have liked to have him for a son-in-law, but then something happened to him on his travels. My daughter was sent to a labor camp, and my grandson was born there. Another demon brought me the newborn child. After that, I decided to help the demons whenever I can. There's not a lot I can do for you, but look at it as thanks for my grandson."

"I understand, that's why you said 'peepee'," Gwendal said.

"That's right! You two wanted to find a bathroom! Why haven't you gone, then? It's not healthy to hold back for so long!"

Gwendal shot me an ice cold glare. "'Peepee' is a slang term for brother."

Aha. And why didn't anyone tell me that before?

"This other demon has been here a few times since, to check on us. He even offered to take us to Jilda's father's homeland, if I should notice that Jilda is growing too much more slowly than the other children. If the demon blood in him is strong, then he can expect a long life, but also slower physical development. Because of that, he might be bullied by the other children. Despite his dignified and calm speech, this guy was a really quick thinker. He looked a little like you, actually."

I pulled at Gwendal via the chain. "Why were the demons involved if it was a civil war in this country?"

"Because of the decaying corpses," he growled in an extremely unfriendly voice, and then was silent.

"Could you be a little more explicit?"

The girl took up the explanation. "You see, it happened like this: The messengers of the demon folk brought us the remains of the soldiers that had fallen at distant borders. When I was a child, I was told that these people were devils who robbed the dead bodies. But that was wrong. Now I know that the demons are good people." The bride smiled as she reached the end of her speech, and her smile looked to be completely honest.

For the second time, I took a closer look at the girl. I discovered that she actually did look like a girl, in that everything about her was small and thin. She had a deep tan from the sun, red-brown hair and lively eyes of the same color, that were full of feeling and expression. In comparison to the female demons of the empire, she had a rather small snub nose, and large ears. She looked average through and through, and possessed not a single hint of sex appeal.

"Thanks for the explanation, um... Ms. Bride," I said.

"My name is Nicola. I'm not a bride any more," said the girl and smiled again.

She had a damn sweet smile, and something in her reminded me of a player at the shortstop position in softball. The midsummer sun and a sunvisor would look good on her.

"N-n-n-nice to m-m-m-meet you, Nicola, I'm Yu-yu-yu-yuuri." I could feel myself just about to fall head over heels in love with her.

"Nice to meet you too, Yu-yu-yu-yuuri."

Dammit!

Nicola tilted her head to the side like a little bird. "Won't you introduce me to your sweetheart?"

"That is not my sweetheart!"

"But of course he is, you two have eloped together. Despite all the resistance from your friends and family, and --"

"Why doesn't anyone ever listen to me?! I'm engaged to his younger brother!" Oh God, had I lost it completely? My face began to burn, the veins at my temples filled with blood...

Gwendal pulled a yellowed paper from his shirt. "Near the border, we were mistaken for this couple here," he said.

In front of us lay one of those silly drawings, the unbelievable masterwork of a kindergartner who'd been allowed to run wild with his crayons for the first time.

Nicola's smile transformed immediately into shock. "That's me!" she exclaimed.

Not in this lifetime! That was Charlie Brown, nothing more! "Nonsense, that can't be you. Even if it were, then who is this other guy supposed to be?"

"That's Hube and me, one month ago."

This name rang a bell.

Gwendal slowly crossed his arms over his chest. It was accompanied by the sound of clanking metal, and my left arm was dragged upwards, too.

"Surely you don't mean Gegenhuber Griesela?" asked Gwendal.

Nicola nodded. "His hair and eye color is a little different, but at first glance you two do look alike, with your grumpy dispositions. But actually, Hube is a really dear man. Oh, my Hube..." sighed Nicola and turned her gaze down to the floor.

Then her tears rolled down her knee. They'd fallen directly out of her eyes, without touching her cheek or chin.

"I miss him so much," sobbed the girl.

"Come now, don't cry," I said, somewhat confused. "If you'd eloped with Gegenhuber, then why did you want to marry that soldier back there?"

I stretched my hand out to console Nicola, but I couldn't reach, the chain was too short.

"I'm going to break the damn fool's neck!" rumbled Gwendal with a growl in his voice.

I didn't have the courage to ask who he was talking about.

Chapter 6

Conrad and his companions noticed the faint shape of the city despite the sand storm that had recently raged over the sand dunes. Everyone felt relieved. Yuuri and Gwendal must have also stopped at this city to stock up water and to change horses. With some luck, they would be able to find both of them there. Everyone harbored the hope that they would soon see their King and their Chief Commander safe and sound again.

Conrad gathered his men in the lee of some rocks. He dismounted and prepared to explore the situation in the city himself.

"Your Excellency, but you can send one of the men out as scout," protested Boyd.

"That's right," waved Conrad. "However I'm probably the best among us all to deal with the locals. For this purpose, it's best to blend in. It's time I take advantage of my appearance." Boyd's face looked slightly embarrassed as Conrad went on, "You all know I understand the human well. Moreover, I myself am half human."

"Conrad!"

The voice of the handsome Ex-Prince had returned to normal, a sweet tenor tone. Although he dressed like a police officer in tropical climate, his outfits made him look like a boy scout. It would be no problem in the evening, but during the day, exposing that much skin under the scorching sun was suicidal.

"You have to let me know right away, if you should find Yuuri and my brother," Wolfram said nervously.

"I promise."

Wolfram put both hands on his hip, puffed his chest up and said with a haughty voice: "And if you do not want to join in the search for the Magic Flute, that's not a problem. You can always turn back."

"Why do you say that?"

"I know you don't want to face Gegenhuber. And if we find the Magic Flute, that guy must be near by."

Wolfram's tone towards his brother was still far from being respectful, but at least he seemed to care about Conrad's feeling. Compared to his behavior a few months ago, this was by all means a huge progress.

"Besides, Yuuri would pay more attention to me when you're not around."

"Yes, yes, I got that already."

Conrad held up his left arm to protect his eyes from the sun and walked away.

Almost all the shops in the city, the rows of houses that wriggled like an eel through the dunes, were already closed. The entrance was guarded by many soldiers. They were distinguished from all others by a very strange hairstyle. Conrad remembered the strange people he had seen during his stay in London: The hairstyle of these soldiers was actually very similar to those Englishmen, who pierced holes everywhere on their bodies and were called punks.

Conrad wondered briefly what would be the best way to approach these men.

"Damn it, if only the men of Suberera could share some of their strength with my companions," he spoke to them.

The punk-heads grinned. Conrad was pleased with the result.

"They are delicate like flowers. The sand storm is just too much for them. Are there any hotels in this city?"

"We ourselves don't have enough water and women, but there are plenty of liquor and beds."

"Beds would be just fine. If we had to camp out tonight, I would probably wake up tomorrow morning all alone."

"That must be the case, if you have only wimps around you."

"Tell me about it. One more question though: Have you seen two strangers in the city? They have very different builds, one taller and one shorter. Do you happen to know where they stay for the night?"

"What, you know these two?" Excited, the soldier tapped his finger on a leaf of paper that his subordinate handed to him. "Surely you mean these two here. Yes, they were here. We almost arrested them, but they ran away hand in hand!"

Conrad looked skeptically at the hand-drawn pictures on the wanted poster.

"They look quite different from this drawing..."

"You are looking for them? You got to be the one cuckolded, am I right, old boy? So it's your girlfriend or wife-to-be who ran away."

"I can't quite follow you."

"No wonder. You don't look that bad at all, but this demon was really a first-class specimen. There's only one thing I can't comprehend still: how the hell did that chick manage to wrap one guy after another around her finger? Really, she didn't even have decent tits! Isn't that so, guys?"

A soldier with a red face nodded.

"She's flat like a board. But amazingly strong for a girl."

That must be the result of his training.

"And a dirty mouth too."

That would be the gift he had been born with.

"Boy, boy," the leader continued. "She might have been quite good-looking, but for a girl, she's not that attractive. Tell me, what is it that you like about her?"

The conversation had taken a strange direction. Conrad was indeed looking for two people of different heights, but certainly not a couple. Or perhaps the soldiers had mistaken one of the two for a woman?

"But they couldn't have gone far. We have chained them together. Sorry, old boy, but my comrades will certainly track them down before you. After all, you'll earn a decent sum if you capture a pair of elopers. The government pays a huge reward, I'm sure you know that."

Conrad could not believe his ears: A pair of elopers chained together! How on earth would he break this news to Wolfram?

I waited and waited and still no one brought us water. Although I was in a stranger's house, I eventually decided to go looking for water myself. The thirst was simply unbearable.

Just when I stood up from my chair, the boy called Jilda came running holding a huge fan in his hand. He seemed on the verge of tears with embarrassment.

"You do not need to bring me fan," I said. "I would just like to drink a glass of water. Maybe you could take me to the kitchen?"

"Hey, boy!"

Gwendal waved for Jilda to approach him and thrust a handful of banknotes into his hand.

"Use this to buy some alcohol, a drink without alcohol, and something for dinner. You can keep the change. Can you do this without losing the money?"

"I'm already ten," said Jilda.

He didn't look that old at all. I would have thought him to be no more than six. Or maybe he had a long life expectancy and so he developed slower than a human child? Without a trace of fear of the demon General, the boy nodded.

It was probably because of the boy's puppy eyes that Gwendal suddenly became so unusually amiable. Since this scary blue-eyed man had a soft spot for anything cute, his heart must have softened.

Shas the bald man and I responded in surprise.

"Listen, you don't need to trouble yourself for me," I said. "It doesn't have to be mineral water. At home I drink water straight from the tap."

And Shas said in protest to Gwendal: "You are our guests. We do not accept charity!"

"The same applies to us," Gwendal replied. "We also do not want to accept charity."

"That's why you only need to bring me some water," I tried to appease both parties. "If there's no tap water, I'll drink well water. That's okay."

"There is no water in Suveria..." Nicola said in a soft sorrowful voice.

The tears that she had shed for Huber had dried up quickly and left white streaks on her cheeks.

"There has been no rain for almost two years. Even the groundwater has slowly run dry. We have no choice but to import alcohol and fruit from other countries. There are a small ration of drinking water for everyone, but it's only enough to survive."

"You can't get water from any neighboring countries?"

"Our country is finally independent! All others around us are enemies," cried Nicola.

Never in my life would I have expected that I would hear from this girl, who still wore her wedding dress and whose smile felt like a ray of sunshine, the word "enemy" spoken in such horror and hatred.

Meanwhile Jilda rushed out of the house.

Nicola continued: "If only it would rain! Then even poor children and their parents would have enough water to drink. The crops would grow; the cows would produce milk... Huber was searching for an object that could make it happen. He has promised that he would help us."

"Did Gegenhuber really say that he would himself use this object to help the human?"

Gwendal voice had regained its usual threatening tone.

"Yes, he did," Nicola affirmed.

"I swear I'll break his neck!"

"Why do you say such awful things? What do you have against Huber? He was the one who showed me that demons are actually good-natured. Through him I learned that when you're in love, it doesn't matter if the other is human or demon. To save Huber, I was even willing to get married to this soldier whom I have no feeling for. They promised me that they would then release Huber."

She started crying again.

Gwendal looked grim, arms folded on his chest. Despite Nicolas' desperate tears, Gwendal's composure didn't change one bit.

"Please don't worry," I tried to calm the girl. "Under no circumstances will I allow anyone to take your lover's life. I know it doesn't look that way, but I do have a little bit more authority than this guy here. By the way, even though he always says nasty things, as soon as there is something small and cute in front of him, he will become quite gentle."

"Really?" sniffed Nicola.

"Yes, really."

"Stop that nonsense immediately!" Gwendal snorted.

"He will not take my baby away?"

"Good heavens, no! Babies stay with their mothers!"

Wait, what was that? A baby? Which baby?

"You have already planned for a baby? When?"

"Quite soon. The baby is already growing inside me."

Nicolas' smile brightened up her face again.

"But please don't think anything bad of me. It is of course Huber's child," she said.

What? She wanted her bridegroom to foster the baby of another man? The world burst and shattered into pieces in me.

"This... this damned bastard!"

The color on Gwendal's face kept changing. First, it became pale, then dark red. Any moment now, the veins on his temples would be swelling and throbbing.

"Stay calm, Gwendal! Take it easy, cool down! "

"Shut up," he snapped at me. "I'm as cool as a cucumber! It does not concern me at all if this girl brings Huber's brat into this world or if the bastard himself kicked the bucket!"

I grabbed his arm. We looked like the couple in the bronze statue "The Golden Demon" I had seen in Atami.

Nicola stared at Gwendal, her mouth half opened in horror. The fingers she pressed against her lips trembled slightly.

"Gwendal, you can't frighten her like that! It is not good for the baby! Oh my God, the baby," I shouted in panic.
"How are we supposed to take care of him? I have no experience with such things. What do we do now?"

"How should I know?" Gwendal roared.

That was of course a justified question. After all, men don't have babies. Except, of course, Arnie in the movie.

"You surely have one or two secret children with your mistresses, don't you? Having love affairs is hardly avoidable. Besides, you have two younger brothers. You must have been probably there when they were born."

"No," said Gwendal.

"What, no? But you're still an older brother," I replied.

"Everything is just fine. Stop making a fuss there," our host suddenly said.

Gwendal righted his fallen chair, while Shas looked thoughtfully at Nicola with a warm smile. What did he see in her, perhaps his own daughter, who also had a child with a demon? In any case, his dark face visibly brightened.

"How have you ever got into such a complicated situation?"

Nicola turned her attention to Shas.

Gwendal had finally decided to sit down again, but his fingers fidgeted on his knees as if he was operating a joystick. He always did that when he was irritated.

"I lost my parents during the civil war, so I grew up in an orphanage near Zorasia. At sixteen I was to marry into a family chosen by the Church and lead a normal life. In the village there was a mine of exorcist-stones; all the women worked there. You surely know that only women can harvest these stones."

"Why?" I quietly asked my handcuffed companion, but received no answer.

"About half a year ago, while a terrible sandstorm raged through the area, Huber came to my village. Everyone was afraid of him because he was a demon, except me. After all, it was a demon messenger who brought my fallen father's remains back to us. Our souls have found each other quickly."

"Not to mention your body," I heard Gwendal mutter through grinding teeth next to me.

"A dark past weighed on poor Hube. Great pain in his soul had left its mark on him. He was afraid to love, but together we have overcome that fear."

"Did he tell you?" asked Gwendal.

"What do you mean?"

"Did Gegenhuber tell you what he had done in his past?"

Nicola frowned and slightly shook her head.

"No, Huber didn't say anything."

Gwendal let out another growl.

"Now calm down already! This is not good for your blood pressure," I tried to soothe the bad-tempered man. "I have an idea. Whenever you get angry, you should caress something soft and fluffy to calm yourself down."

Gwendal grabbed my head between his huge hands and squeezed.

"Arrgggghhh!" I shouted. "Not me! I'm not fluffy!"

Nicola went on, "One day Huber told me that he was looking for a precious treasure. He had already found a part of it and hidden it in a safe place. No one could ever find it there. The missing half was rumored to be in my village. He said the treasure would be a wonderful instrument, and when the right person plays it, it would rain. So, I stole the key from the church, and we sneaked into the excavation site a couple of times. There, we found the second half of this legendary treasure."

"I can't help thinking that this man used you," I sighed.

The girl, deeply in love, ignored my comment.

Could this instrument really be the famous Magic Flute Gegenhuber had been searching for?

"What does it look like?" asked Gwendal.

"It's a dark brown pipe," she said.

"A pipe?" I repeated.

"Yes. And I think it has affected the place somehow. Since we removed it, there are no more exorcist-stone in that excavation site. Not the smallest speck, nothing. You could dig as much as you want, you wouldn't find anything. People from the village did not know that we were the cause; still we had no choice but to run away. Otherwise we would surely have been arrested, sooner or later."

Big tears were rolling down again from Nicolas' large and lively eyes. She was like the weather in the mountains, sudden rain, then sudden sunshine. No girl in my class let their feelings run so blatantly unchecked.

"They discovered we were an eloping couple and they distribute the arrest warrant for us all over the country. Huber wanted to take me to his homeland. He said that his Queen was very tolerant of love affairs between humans and demons. There we could be together as a couple openly in front of everyone. In my dreams, that place was paradise."

Well, I thought. Was it really? Was the empire of the demons really paradise? It still did not deserve this name, but had I helped to make it better?

You need to know, Nicola, now I am the king of your dream land. At least I try to make it a better place...

Suddenly, I wish someone would pat my back encouragingly. I wish someone would tell me that everything would be fine. I longed for the crazy praise of Conrad and Gunter - even if they were mostly thin air.

Nicolas' fine and clear voice brought me back to myself. "We wanted to bypass the capital and make our stop at

another city. There too, the wells had dried up. When I saw that even the children had to suffer from the thirst, I could no longer contain myself. At a hostel, while Huber was not there, I brought this tube out, examined it, rubbed it, and tapped on it. At last, I tried to play it. But nothing happened, the rain didn't come. And unfortunately, the village elder caught me right then. He said that would be the Magic Flute of the Demon King! And since it was in my possession, I must therefore be the Demon King himself! "

"Then you tried to escape from the hostel!" I said.

"Yeah! But we were immediately captured. How do you know? "

I couldn't answer her question, but that was the only way the story of the arrested double who bolted without paying could be explained."

"Then you were almost executed," I said.

"Yeah! But the son of a prominent person in the capital had strangely taken a liking to me. They told me if I marry him, maybe they could release Huber as well. That is why I was at the wedding..."

"So you are the double!"

I jumped up. Nicola fell silent in surprise.

The surprise, however, was rather on our side. Who would have thought that the primary mission of this trip - to save the double - had already been carried out successfully? And that my double was actually a girl!

"But we don't look one bit alike, do we? Gwendal, could you see any resemblance?"

"No," he said curtly after taking a quick sharp look at both of us.

"So I said! There is absolutely nothing to mistake one of us for the other! I am a boy, Nicola is a girl. We may be about the same size, but the shoulders, upper body and the muscles give us completely different builds. "

"Hair and eye color are somewhat similar," Shas said cautiously.

But only a little! The people from Suveria were confused because they had no idea how the 27th Demon King Yuuri Shibuya really looked like. And because Nicola had the Magic Flute.

"Do you mean to say that... that I was mistaken with you?" Nicola was astonished.

"That's right! And then Gwendal and I were mistaken with you and Gegenhuber."

"What happened to the pipe?" Gwendal interrupted.

"Don't you want to know what happened to your cousin Huber?" I replied.

"You're the cousin of Huber? This is Huber's cousin?" Nicola was absolutely over the moon. Hopefully, the excitement didn't harm the baby.

"Oh, good heavens! It never occurred to me. I'm all confused now. I am very happy to make your acquaintance. My name is Nicola. I have allowed myself to enter into a serious relationship with Huber. My God, Yuuri! Do you also end up being a relative of Huber? If you are Gwendal's treasure, then... "

"I'm not his treasure!"

"What happened to Gegenhuber and the pipe?" Gwendal impatiently interrupted again.

"They should have released Huber, but I haven't seen him for the last two weeks. The pipe..."

Nicola had lost all the excitement and was again on the brim of tears, as she put her hand through the neckline of her dress.

"It's here," she said and pulled something out.

"What? This strange object?" I exclaimed in surprise.



The dark brown tube was a little thicker than a thumb. On the front there were three holes, and on the back, one hole. It was at most four inches long. If my memory did not deceive me, I had seen something very similar once before.

"Huber and I have tried to make it rain in this country, but the pipe has brought no miracle. I think a treasure of the demons would only give the demons its blessing."

'Well, do you really?"

If Nicola was right, this thing was damn stingy. Perhaps it had indeed a soul...

Nicola gave the object to Gwendal. After he examined it carefully, he put it in my chained left hand.

"What do I do with it?"

"It's yours," said Gwendal.

"But I cannot handle this thing anyway. I would feel better if you take care of it. "

"It was made just for you. It only listens to your commands. Remember Morgif?"

Morgif was the legendary sword that only the Demon King could handle. It had a weird face, from which it had spat a yellow liquid all around. It could moan pitifully and it had bit my finger before. The experience was very unpleasant.

What should I do if this treasure turned out to be just as rebellious?

"All right. I'd try my best to elicit some tune from this thing. Watch out, maybe I'll ignite even a storm!"

The size of this flute was more like an ocarina than a piccolo flute. I carefully placed my lips on one of the holes and tried to play it as I would a flute.

But wait...! But that wouldn't be an indirect kiss, would it? The idea that the lips of this cute girl had also touched this flute drove me crazy. Blood rushed to my head and my face turned red.

Fffffft

"Funny..."

Fffffft

"Are you really sure this is a flute?" asked Nicola.

The stupid thing did not make a sound. Even the whistle of our sport teacher was more of a flute. Even the fart of my brother was more melodious. The demonstration was more painful than expected. It was fortunate that Wolfram wasn't there. Imagine the insults he would have hurled at me if he had witnessed my poor performance. But I could not allow myself to back down.

"Maybe you didn't hold the flute correctly," Gwendal said. "Try playing it from the end, not from the side."

"Lengthwise? Like this?" I mumbled, and I put the flute as a stick in my mouth.

I took a deep breath, filled my lungs with air, then blew violently into the pipe. Unfortunately, I had forgotten that to play wind instruments, I had to draw air from my abdomen.

Fffff ...

Ahhhhhhhhh!

"Damn, what was that?" I shouted out in shock.

A flute that uttered a cry of alarm when we played it? How disgusting!

Chapter 7

If Lord von Kleist couldn't even manage this trifle, his powers were sorely lacking. No wonder one had to listen to people saying again and again these days what sissies the men of today were, along with their magic.

Lady Anissina von Karbelnikoff's bright blue eyes flashed as they bored down on their prey. Gunter stared intently at a point on the ground and muttered softly under his breath.

"His Majesty must have already found Gegenhuber. He must have given a wonderful performance on the Magic Flute. Ahh, my beloved Majesty! How pure and classy and beautiful these songs must be. And eye-opening as well!"

And so Gunter went on singing praises of his beloved king.

"The flute calls the rain, no, the storm forward. When the fine, silky black hair of His Majesty gets wet, it becomes even darker and shines even more beautifully..."

"You said the Magic Flute would make it rain?"

As Gunter heard the voice of the demon, shivers ran down his spine.

"I also heard the name Gegenhuber? I do not like this man at all. He still holds on to this obsolete idea that love between men and demons is wrong."

The unfailingly calm way she spoke proved that she would not let herself be ruled by her anger, and that inspired boundless fear. Gunter did not dare turn around to look at her.

"How much had Susannah Julia suffered because of this man..."

When she spoke longingly of the name of their deceased friend, her voice trembled ever so slightly.

"Sending Gegenhuber on the search for the Magic Flute was one of the few decisive measures Gwendal ordered. Still, I did not expect that he would really find it."

"Anissina ...?" Lord von Kleist timidly asked.

The Red Devil had carried in an enormous green shield with a precious jade plate on top. She grabbed the retreating Gunter, dragged him to the shield and put the plate on his palm.

"Right, and now just imagine in your head that it's raining."

"If you would be kind enough, perhaps briefly explain to me first, what effect would this strange design have?"

"Don't ask unnecessary questions. If you provide the magic, you'll see for yourself."

Gunter had feared this. But after a sleepless night, he had already come up with an excuse for this specific situation that he now found himself in.

"But... that will not do, my dear! You could be planning to overthrow this nation and commit the high treason against His Majesty! If you want to improve your technology for this purpose, I would never assist you in any possible way. That would make me an accomplice in your plot. You must know the purpose of my life is solely for the protection of His Majesty..."

"It's a rain spell, Gunter."

"A rain spell? What a vile deed! Ah... Excuse me? Did you say a rain spell?"

Thrown completely of his track, Gunter couldn't say another word.

"Exactly. We will no longer have to depend on the unreliable power of the Magic Flute. From now on we can use our own magic to make it rain. I have heard that our neighboring countries have been suffering from water shortages for some time. If my invention proves successful, with one blow, our demon tribe will command awe and terror all over the world! I hereby present to you the magic rain spell device, the 'Rain Frog'!"

"The 'Rain Frog'... I'm suddenly overcome by an uncontrollable appetite for insects." Was it perhaps because of the fact that the green shield and the jade plate Gunter was now balancing on his back and his head make him look like Kawako, the Japanese water spirit who has the appearance of a frog?

It was a child, not the flute, which had let out the cry.

The child's loud cry came in from the street. Shas was the first to run out of the room. I hurriedly followed, pulling a grumpy Gwendal behind since he was still chained to me. He told the bride, still in her wedding dress, to stay inside.

"Leave my boy alone! Don't you dare touch him!" Roared the grandfather.

Surrounded by five children, who had thrown him on the dry ground, Jilda was howling from the top of his lungs. His bag had been thrown on the street, from which some of vegetables had rolled out. Suddenly, the grandfather fell tumbling to the ground - the kids had brought him down and started fighting ruthlessly for the contents of the bag. This robbery took place openly in public under the most beautiful purple evening sky. The children were ten years old and they were all bigger than Jilda. This had clearly gone too far!

"Hey! Hey! It's quite cowardly to rob a smaller child!"

The children picked the fruit and the bottle of water from the bag and stood up, turned around to leave. Shas crawled over to his grandson.

A boy from the group looked at me.

"Small? He's much older than us."

Damn, they were right of course. I had forgotten that Jilda was half demon.

"Even so, he's still smaller than you! Give the bag back right now and leave them alone. And apologize yourselves..."

One of the boys threw something at me.

Yes, think! Although I had never left the reserve bench, I still had more than a decade of experience as a catcher. Even without a glove, I would be able to catch the balls from the tiny tots of the Little League.

I wanted to bow my head to the front left, but I could not lift it because of the heavy chain. I tilted my head to one side instead and missed the dangerous ball in a hair's breath. It got Gwendal behind me. Not a good idea, children!

"He just doesn't grow," shouted a boy. "It doesn't make any difference whether he eats or not."

There was neither sarcasm nor hatred in his voice. His tone was as if he was stating a matter-of-course fact in the world.

"And if he does not grow, he will not grow. Then he can't become a soldier to earn his own living. Why waste food on a dwarf like that, who will eventually turn out to be no good. It's true!"

"Who has put this horrible nonsense into your head?" I exclaimed in shock. "Try saying that to your parents or anyone else! How messed up are you?! There is no need for everyone to sign up as soldier!! Don't you have any dreams?"

"We can't drink dreams," replied one of the boys.

"Will dreams make the cattle healthy again?" asked another, while he kicked Jilda with his thin legs. "Will dreams make the fields green again? If I can have more food by dreaming, I'd happily sleep for days at a stretch! As much as I can!"

These were his last words before he flew three yards through the air. Gwendal had resorted to the law of the jungle. He bent down and meticulously picked up the scattered coins.

"I had said that the boy can keep the change. Not you."

"To hell with your money!" the boy cursed.

Without standing up, he quickly slipped away from Gwendal. The other children slowly moved backwards to secure the escape route.

"We do not want your dirty money! I can see your chain, you are but criminals on the run! How could you be so stupid, hiding away in this old man's house? Shall I tell you something...?!"

Darned, we forgot to hide the chain!

Shas, who could finally free his legs, picked up his grandson. Jilda was still sobbing quietly.

"The old man sold even his own daughter to the authorities for money."

"Don't give me that crap," I shouted.

That had to be a lie! Shas was the grandfather of a half-demon child, who approved of his daughter's marriage to a demon. After all, he had helped us.

Suddenly we could hear the footsteps of some dozen pairs of boots around us. At dusk, the lights lit up the streets from all directions and in no time we were surrounded by a group of people.

"Do not move!" a voice commanded.

"Please tell me this is not true," I moaned.

But unfortunately, we were indeed surrounded by about thirty soldiers with guns in their hands.

The grandfather dodged my eyes and turned away. He held Jilda in his arms.

What had these children said? How would one earn his living, if he couldn't become a soldier?

Shas had no sushi hairstyle, and, on top of that, he limped. In addition, he was too old to join the Army.

"Well, yeah. He'd do everything for his grandchild, "I said.

(The rest of the chapter was translated by [info]kannnichtfranz here.)

"We were informed that fugitives were hiding here!" bellowed a soldier. "Identify yourselves! What is your crime?"

I would also have liked to know that!

A man with a double chin, who could've easily been mistaken for Johann Sebastian Bach, had asked that question in an authoritative voice. Probably he was the boss. His Bach-face was crowned by a sea urchin sushi haircut.

"Gwendal, what do we do now? Our criminal file keeps getting thicker."

"How should I know!"

"Oi, we'll have no whispering!" called the soldier. "This afternoon, a bride was kidnapped from the church, and you two match the description of the culprits."

The bride! I'd almost forgotten her. Gwendal and I were sure to figure something out, but Nicola was pregnant.

"No idea what you're talking about. We haven't seen any bride!" I said, intentionally loudly.

The food had been carted off, and the boys had all disappeared. Any curious onlookers had been chased away by the soldiers, and even Shas had retreated a few steps with Jilda in his arms.

More than anything, I just wanted to start crying, but I couldn't allow myself that. Nicola was more important.

"Have you seen a bride here anywhere?" I asked Gwendal in the hope that he would play along.

Lord von Voltaire took the stage with fierce, flashing eyes, exuding self confidence.

"It's true, we are really on the run. But as you all can see, we are just an eloped couple," he said.

"Yes, exactly!" I said and presented the back of my right hand, with the Sea World stamp.

"Why would we possibly be interested in other people's women?" Gwendal continued.

"Well said, darling! We are so in love, we only have eyes for each other. Isn't that so?"

"How right you are." The honest face that Gwendal pulled at these words was worse than creepy. I stretched as far as I could to try and put my arm around Gwendal's shoulders. The chain was too short though, it didn't quite work.

Someone kicked me in the gut, and I sank hard to my knees. "If you are hiding the bride, you will bitterly regret it!" roared the boss.

"Boss!" a younger man called over to us. He sounded like his voice was breaking with puberty, and he waddled as he carried an armful of white material. "I have the bride's dress!"

"Good, look over there, men!"

Excellent, Nicola had escaped! But without her dress. What was she wearing now as she ran through the streets? Could she be naked? Oh no, no pregnant bride would ever do something like that!

"How boring," murmured the boss to himself and snapped with his tongue. "Arrest them! But first, logistics. What are your names?"

Hm, good question, what were our names again? Nothing occurred to me. Luckily Gwendal was more successful.

"My name is Yanbo," he said.

"And my name is Mabo," I said quickly.

Yanbo and Mabo -- the droll little mascots of the weather report on TV. It'll be hot and sunny again tomorrow!

It wasn't exactly the ideal time for it, but as our well-guarded carriage rocked back and forth, I fell asleep. The stress and the extreme exhaustion had finally forced me to find some rest. Even the clattering jolts from the wooden wheels seemed as relaxing to me as the rolling of the waves at sea.

"Good show, little one!" '

"Spare me your sarcasm, Gwendal," I murmured.

"I didn't say anything."

Then it must've been the plump soldier who rode with us in the small cabin. As I woke up, I found myself leaning on Gwendal's shoulder. I sat myself upright hastily. It was just as embarrassing as if I'd fallen asleep on the shoulder of a complete stranger in the subway.

"Try to get some more sleep," said Gwendal.

"I can't do that if it's just me who gets to make himself comfortable," I protested. "After all, you are also exhausted, and you'd certainly have a right to be annoyed if the person right next to you snores happily away. And anyhow, for the time being we're still considered an eloped couple. We can't let any bad feelings seem to come between us."

The older brother snorted quietly. Was that a laugh?

"I think maybe you are something of a freak."

"I am a freak? Are you trying to rile me up? Wait just a minute, if we're not careful, the guard can hear everything we say."

"Use the high language of the demons. It'll be very difficult for them to understand what we're saying then."

And just what was that, again? I had never heard of it. But it didn't matter, our guard was in the middle of a nice nap, so we could speak normally.

"Why are you always so keen to get yourself into trouble?" Gwendal stared stiffly ahead as he spoke, his scowling eyes not looking at me. "You are the king. You had the opportunity to leave all the state responsibilities to your underlings while you reveled in hedonism."

"Unfortunately I have no idea how to revel in hedonism," I replied.

"Isn't there anything that appeals to you? Riches, delicacies, women?"

Naturally I didn't have anything against those things. It's true that I'd never found myself in the possession of much money, or a gourmet kitchen, and especially girls, but surely I would like all those things. "At the moment, baseball is the most important thing to me," I said in the end.

"Then why don't you just occupy yourself with baseball?"

"I'm already doing that, have been for almost ten years."

"So, baseball is not dependent on the office of the demon king?"

"No, enthusiasm is the only thing that one needs."

"Then find a more expensive hobby."

"Why?"

Gwendal turned to face me -- I'd never seen such a clueless expression from him before. His scowling eyes had lost a tiny bit of their confidence.

"Is the role of the demon king to while away the tax money of his people? Do you really think that that's the way a demon king should behave?"

"No, but... up until now, all the demon kings that have been chosen from the ranks of the commoners have acted in that fashion."

"I didn't know that." After all, I was chosen through a public toilet, out of the clear blue sky. When I was informed that I was supposed to be the demon king, I knew absolutely nothing about the world of the demons. I hadn't been prepared, neither mentally nor spiritually.

"I'm just a baseball boy, like you find on every corner. It's impossible for me to be able to do the job as well as you could. There's nothing I can do but follow my instincts to decide what is right. Maybe I'll go down in history as a bloody beginner, a weakling, and the worst leader of all times. But what else can I do? I have only my puny sixteen years of experience to draw on."

Since the reassurance I craved never came, I lost my courage then. The carriage abruptly began to swing back and forth, and the soldier spoke some nonsense words in his sleep. Through the barred window, the sky, long since gone dark, could be seen.

"And if I do make a really backwards decision, then there are enough competent people around to stop me from doing anything too stupid." Luckily I would always have Günter, Conrad, and Wolfram, my unintentional fiancé, on my side. And let's not forget Gwendal, who would watch my every step with an eagle eye, and who loved his country more than anyone else.

"Gwendal, you'd definitely stop me, right?"

Gwendal relaxed his jaws, and a bunch of little wrinkles built up around his eyes. His smile was so peaceful and warm, like I'd never imagined possible.

"Can I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

"Who's Yanbo? How did you come up with that name so quickly?"

"Ah... that's the name of the little one I was taking care of not long ago."

"I knew it, you do have secret children!"

"Yanbo is a bunny rabbit."

Just a second, come again?

"Did you really say 'bunny rabbit' just now?!"

Before I could get an answer, the carriage came to a halt. The door was opened, and we stepped out, flanked by guards to the left and right. If there were sunglasses and pipes, our entrance would have been perfect. Then we'd have looked just like General MacArthur in the schoolbooks of Japanese history, as he strode up the gangway. Wasn't this contingent of soldiers extremely overdone, just to accept an eloped couple into custody?

We were led into a stone building that looked just as if the first floor of the parliament building had been transported into it. At the entrance there was a sign, but as always, I couldn't read the letters.

"What is this place?" I asked Gwendal.

"The family court."

We stepped inside. In the background, music that sounded like it belonged in a horror film was playing.

"Gwendal?! What's wrong with you? You look terrible." His forehead and neck were covered in sweat, though it was relatively cool in the building.

"The power of exorcism... the entire building is full of it..." Gwendal murmured resolutely.

"What do you mean by that? I don't smell any incense, and I don't see any smoke around, either. Or does it have something to do with the weird music?"

"What music? I don't hear anything."

He could only move forwards very slowly and all hunkered over. I didn't feel bad myself, but the demon stone that lay against my chest had become hot.

"In there!" shouted a soldier, and gave me a push.

When I stumbled inside, I found myself in a sort of courtroom. It was medium-sized; about the size of a lecture hall. The walls and floor were made of highly polished, milky white stone. Four old men sat at a podium; presumably the judges. They each had just enough white hair remaining to be built into the standard Iroquois hairstyle. Although there were seats available, I didn't see one single spectator. On the other side of the wooden railing, there were neither lawyers nor witnesses.

In the middle of the room were three people, arguing with each other. Two men held a loudly crying woman by each arm and seemed to be playing tug of war with her; neither would let go. One of the men eventually fell over backwards, and apparently, the decision was met.

The puffed up guy, who had never let go of her arm, left the room. His chest was swollen with pride, and he had the woman, who'd lost consciousness from the pain and shock, slung over his shoulder.

"Just" was not exactly the right word for what went on here.

"Next!"

Since no one else was around, apparently it was our turn.

"Yanbo and Mabo!" called one of the judges. "Ohoho, two men!"

As we were shoved front and center, I realized that one of the judges was not nearly as old as I'd thought. He seemed to have dyed his hair white on purpose. His head was the only thing sticking out of his spherically-shaped clothing. It was brown from the sun and had deep laugh lines -- he looked like a Japanese good weather doll.

"Those chains look quite heavy," he said to us. "The tall one is Yanbo? You are a demon? As I see it, you don't look too well, but that's not surprising. This building is protected with the power of exorcism. For demons with magical powers, this place is far from comfortable. So, let's get this done! You two will surely be relieved to get out of those handcuffs, am I right?"

This man didn't give the impression of a judge at all. He was more like an amiable uncle who talked fast. His speech was not authoritarian, nor did he use complicated expressions to make himself seem important. Perhaps we had a chance, if we explained our circumstances honestly. A "not guilty" verdict even suddenly seemed within the realm of possibility.

"I was told you'd eloped," the friendly uncle continued. "Although I looked for a search warrant, I couldn't find any that matched you, oddly enough."

"You see, it was like this," I began, but was immediately interrupted.

"In order for us to remove the chains, you must convince me that you are really going to separate. You must swear that you will reunite with, and marry, your predetermined lawful partner, and start a family."

"Bu...but that thing about the law..law..lawful partner is n..n...not that simple," I stuttered.

"You were persecuted, and everywhere you went people pointed their fingers at you -- a life of shame. If you'd known before that all of this stood before you, you surely would have remained reasonable and not gone against the will of the Gods, not fallen into the puddle of sin of such a reprehensible relationship."

"Puddle of sin?" I repeated in disbelief.

I had a bad feeling about how fast and happily this uncle could prattle on. He didn't listen to others at all! This judge just hauled off and ranted about his world views. He openly spoke about his opinions on men and women and same sex marriages. And then finally he spoke himself out.

"How foolish your deeds were, you've had to experience for yourself," he said to us. "Here and now I want to hear from you two, how very abhorrent you find each other."

How stupid could this get? I mean, no couple would elope together if their feelings were so superficial that they'd allow themselves to be convinced to separate merely with a bit of chatter. But whatever. Getting rid of these damn handcuffs took top priority.

"You are so right," I began. "To be completely honest, I really regret it. What could I have been thinking?! I must have been crazy."

The judge gestured at me to continue with his right hand. The other three judges didn't move a muscle.

"Actually, it was clear to me from the beginning, that it would never turn out well with this guy here. We don't get along well at all. To him, I'm nothing. He always treats me like a dumb kid and is gruff with me. It's true, isn't it?"

"Mhm..." rumbled Gwendal.

It really looked like he was sick as a dog. We needed to see to it that we got out of there as soon as possible.

"When I wanted to elope with him, he was always going on about how I was just a dead weight around his neck.

We can't even talk normally to each other."

If I'd done as Gwendal had demanded, and stayed out of this, we would never have gotten to this point. I would be spending my hours in that vacation home in Karbelnikoff, and enjoying the feel of the sun on my stomach at the beach. Gwendal might have found his cousin and returned with the magic flute by now. The thing at fault here was my pigheadedness!

I wanted to do what I thought was right. That's what landed us in this mess. All of my decisions had been wrong. I hadn't come one step closer to being an ideal king -- not one single millimeter. But I was an expert at making trouble for my companions. Since I'd come to this world, people were always having to pull me out of my own self-created messes, even Gwendal. And I had constantly accused him of hating me. It was high time for an apology.

"I'm so sorry, I was an idiot," I said to him.

"Not necessarily."

Gwendal's thundering bass usually shuddered through all your bones, but it had gone weak, quiet, and hard to understand. Although he was barely managing to keep to his feet, he straightened his back.

"In my eyes, you are not such a terrible king," he said.

"That is not very convincing!" said the judge. "You must hate each other enough that you never want to see each other again. That's not the impression I've got right now."

He threw an elongated, gleaming piece of steel at our feet. A clanging noise rang out.

"Pick that up!" ordered the judge.

I stopped short. Before us lay a shortsword with a blade of about twenty centimeters length. The grip, that looked like ivory, was decorating with carvings. Rust-colored flakes had been left behind in the fine grooves. That was blood!

"Pick up that blade! One of you must stab the other with it."

"W...what?" I stuttered.

"Even if it ends in death, no one here will be blamed for that. Come on! Get it behind you. You want to be free of your chains, surely!"

Of course we wanted that! But not like this!

Gwendal slumped unsteadily down to a crouch and picked up the shining blade.

"Gwendal...?" I said tentatively.

He had set one knee down to the ground. Perhaps he didn't even have the strength to stand any more. He looked up at me and pressed the sword grip into my hand.

"You're right handed?"

"Yes, but... I... I can't do this."

"You don't have to kill me straight away."

He touched his left shoulder and watched me with his scowling and cool expression.

"This spot would be relatively bearable. Come on, do it already!"

My fingers trembled pathetically.

"What's wrong?" said Gwendal with suppressed impatience and irritation. "It's not the first time you've held a sword. Do it just like last time."

Last time? But those were completely different circumstances! I'd had a much longer and mightier sword in the duel with Wolfram and with Morgif in the arena. And this time I wasn't being attacked. I just had to reach out and stab. Probably it wouldn't even bleed that heavily. Nonetheless!

"This is just crazy," I murmured. I couldn't see my way through it, to injure someone without a battle or any provocation. "We aren't even mad at each other! On the contrary, we have just barely begun to understand ourselves better. If you think that it's so easy, then you do it! Could you really stab me for no reason with this filthy weapon?"

Gwendal's mouth opened slightly as he pulled a face that said this was no more than he'd expected. In this short moment, Conrad's tortured smile was mirrored in his face. Yep, they were in fact brothers.

"No," Gwendal finally said.

"See, I told you! This whole thing is just completely sick. Absolute rubbish! We should prove our intent to separate by going at each other with a knife? This isn't the middle ages! And all of this in front of a theoretically dignified judge, who looks on smiling with happiness? You've all lost your marbles! And do you know what stinks the worst?"

I pulled Gwendal back to his feet, then turned back to the four men in the judges' seats.

"I hate it when people like you try to tell me how I should manage my own personal relationships! If I want to hate a person, I don't need any outside help to do it! And when I like a person, it's the same! I won't let anyone give me orders me about whether I should separate from someone. I won't let it happen! Yanbo and Mabo will draw no blood!"

I snatched up the ivory grip and flung the sword to the ground. At the clang of metal, all the guards in the room drew in a quick breath.

"Come on, Gwendal, we're out of here! We'll find someone else who can get these chains off of us."

"Stop! Those chains can only be removed here!" There was impatience in the judge's voice.

"What now?" Gwendal asked me, as if it were no big deal. He never even bothered looking at the judge.

I turned around and wanted to go after the short sword. The judges eyes went wide, and they laughed. Cold sweat ran down my back. I

couldn't tell which of the four judges it was who spoke.

"You've made your feelings on the situation quite clear. If that is truly your position, you don't need to let yourself be swayed. It is my decision that the chains shall be removed."

"Really this time?" I asked in disbelief.

"Yes."

But just as I began to believe in our luck, a cold pain at my neck rang through my body. My eyes went dark, and it only took a few seconds for me to lose consciousness.

"Yuuri!" I heard a voice in the distance.

For the first time, Gwendal had called my name.

Chapter 8

At this time of the day, the shops that still had lights on were mostly pubs and brothels.

Since Yuuri was summoned to the Empire of the Demons, Conrad had come to stay in the royal palace. But during the recent decade, he had had numerous opportunities to travel to foreign countries.

The capital of subera was large, but at night the streets were deserted. The bars were bursting with drunken soldiers, but there were no young women in the brothels. Perhaps there weren't enough customers, since all the men were faithful to their wives and only prudish romantic relationships were allowed?

"I don't feel well," Wolfram murmured after trotting in silence next to Conrad for a long time. "This city is full of elements that obey the exorcism. And the number of exorcists themselves is huge."

Since he was not sure if their aimless wandering would be fruitful, Conrad said: "I have no spark of magic in me, so I feel nothing. But if you can't stand it anymore, you can rest in a hostel..."

"Oh, shut up."

As long as Wolfram had enough strength to make insolent retorts, he would not collapse yet, Conrad thought. Given his headstrong younger brother, he sighed and gave up trying to urge him to return.

Since the mining of exorcist-stones was encouraged, the climate of this country had become strange. Although the region had always been suffered from drought, the rainy season used to bring enough rainfall. But those days were over. The crops withered in the fields and the cattle died - the amount of food domestically produced had reached the lowest point and the country was no longer self-sufficient. Instead, the rare exorcist stones were now traded for food in the international market. High-quality stones were sold at horrendous prices, while those of inferior quality were squandered at dumping prices in the domestic market.

Only the privileged wealthy class was able to further increase their wealth, while the majority of people suffered from hunger and thirst. The fact that no one had died from famine so far was probably because at least one member from each family toiled in the mines. It was believed that high-quality exorcist stones could only be excavated by women and children.

After they passed by a brothel without seeing any women, Conrad asked about his other half-brother's strength.

"Would Gwendal be able to use his magic in this city where so many elements obey the exorcism?"

"My brother would still be a great warrior without his magical power. But yeah, I know very few who would still have full command of their magic in a territory so hostile to the demons. Our mother would be able to do so."

His emerald-green eyes darkened, his handsome eyebrows drew together. It was not often that Wolfram hesitated.

"And perhaps Julia Susannah too. I can think of no one else."

"That does not sound good," said Conrad, but he tried not to look too worried."

They walked toward a two-storey building around the corner. As soon as they left the main street and turned into a small alley, they were immediately swallowed in darkness. There were no streetlights. Without the lights from the houses and shops, their eyes could rely only on the dim light from the moon and the stars.

"I just hope that at least one of our troops finds His Majesty," Conrad said.

"We were supposed to meet in the capital, that was settled. I can't imagine that they would not wait for us. I'm sure we owe it again to Yuuri's thick skull that they aren't staying at a hostel. It seems the whole thing was mistaken for a pleasure trip."

And that too from your mouth, Wolfram, Conrad thought and he could only manage to suppress a laugh.

As they were passing by the back side of a brothel, a slender shadow darted out from a stone staircase into the street. Since neither had the time to step aside, they inevitably collided.

This person was bigger than a child. Judging from the body, it could very well be a boy.

"Oh, excuse me."

"Yuuri, is that you?"

Conrad was shocked at the name coming out of his lips. This person, from the depths of his memories, did not even bear a close resemblance to Yuuri.

"How could this be Yuuri?" Wolfram exclaimed with an irritated voice. "Do you have tomatoes on your eyes or what? Yuuri is a lot more gentle and elegant. Moreover, this is a girl - even if she is flat as a board."

"You know Yuuri?" The girl said in amazement.



She took the scarf covering her head down, and stared at the others in the moonlight. She looked alternately at Conrad and Wolfram, and finally her eyes rested on the blond, pretty boy.

"You're a demon, right? You have an extremely beautiful face. Are you friends of Yuuri?"

Conrad hesitated, but Wolfram snorted irritably: "Friends? This must be a joke! Yuuri is my betrothed."

"Really?" Cried the girl.

She was perhaps sixteen or seventeen years old. Without concealing her feelings, her large eyes wandered back and forth uncontrollably under long and dark lashes.

"That would mean that ... that you're ... So then you'd be..." she stammered.

"What?" Wolfram said impatiently.

"Then you are the younger brother, whose fiancé has run off with your own elder brother?"

"What are you saying?"

In an instant, Wolfram's face had turned visibly red even in the pale moonlight. At the same time, steam seemed to be rising from his head.

"Conrad, what does that mean?" He yelled. "My brother and Yuuri! This cannot be true! I knew it! He's a wimpy cheater!"

"Wolfram, calm down. It is certainly not what it looks like."

"But yes, the two are surely a couple," the girl said. "I've seen them with my own eyes. The poor guys were on the run. They were chained together with handcuffs."

"Chained together?"

It had to be boiling water inside Wolfram's head.

"Please don't be angry with them. They seemed very happy to be together. They even picked matching fake names for themselves."

"There must be a good reason for this," Conrad tried to mitigate the situation.

"That I don't know. But Yuuri and this tall cousin of Huber's get along very well. Please, can't you forgive them and rescue them? I would have liked to help them, but I could barely escape myself. I thought maybe I could gain some time if I hide in a place where there are many young women. So I went to this brothel. But you know what? There is no woman here at all! Only young men! I'm seriously worried about what will become of our country!"

The Lord Betrothed has gone completely out of his mind with fury and was by then torturing an innocent garbage can with his feet. Conrad decided to let Wolfram vent his rage. He turned around and put a hand on the shoulder of the girl who was about to break out in tears.

"Do you know where His Majes ... I mean, Yuuri and his companion had gone?"

"At least I can tell you where they were taken. I would have shared the same fate. They would have to stand trial. And if they do not formally swear that they will forever part ways, then ..."

She nervously rubbed her palms on her clothes that did not fit her very well.

"... Then one of them will be thrown into the camp."

The sound of a large and heavy piece of luggage thrown on the floor penetrated my ears, and I slowly came back to consciousness. My arms and legs didn't seem to belong to me. Even if I wanted, I did not have the strength to lift them.

It took me some time to figure out that the piece of luggage was myself. Above me I heard voices. Based on the conversation they were sharing, I had the impression that they weren't particularly bright people.

"Man, look at that, ey. That's not a girl, ey! Isn't it totally crazy to bring a boy here? He can still dig no exorcist-stones, ey."

"Don't you stop to think, ey. It fits. Man, we do what we say. They put the bigger one into prison. Since there is but one camp for the women, they had no choice but to put the kid here, ey. Otherwise, the two guys would be back together again."

If I understood correctly, Gwendal and I were not together anymore. As promised, the white Iroquois had taken the chains off of us, but apparently we had jumped out of the frying pan into the fire. Gwendal was in prison, and I could not even move yet.

"It has recently become very common in the capital, ey."

"So it has become."

"Yeah man, so it has become, ey."

I heard the loud crash of a door brutally flung open. My spine landed on the ground. At last I could feel something, even if it was searing pain. I opened my mouth trying to speak and tried hard to pull open my clamped eyelids.

"Ah... Ouch... "

Many pairs of feet approached trampling on the wooden floor. In my vision, blurred as if covered by a thin veil, I saw pale sky through a small ceiling window: a new day had dawned. Suddenly a face shoved into my sight, right above me - then another and another and another and another.

"Look how young! Are his skin and cheeks as soft as they look? Oh shame, unfortunately they aren't."

Those women touched me in all imaginable places - it was both pleasing and embarrassing at the same time.

"If the boy landed here in the camp with us, that means he is also ..."

"Enough now, girls! It will be morning soon. Let him rest a bit," said an authoritative voice.

They quickly prepared an additional sleeping place in the hall. The lady ordered four women to move over there. I could only see her face dimly, but given the way she commanded the women, she was probably the leader of this group.

The bed was more like a cot with a thin blanket on top. It was as comfortable as a park bench.

"Uh, excuse me? What type of facility do we have here?" I asked as politely as possible.

"This hole is where they dispose of the women who have rebelled against the gods and the community, and have lost everything. They say that even sinners like us can still be of benefit, by digging exorcist-stones," the boss said sarcastically, but once again her voice took on a caring tone. "But why is a boy like you in such a place?"

"I was falsely accused of running away."

"You ran away? Martha, who is sleeping over there, did the same thing."

The boss looked at the bed next to us. In the dim light, I could see a girl with dull blond hair rolled-up in her sleep. Her back turned toward me, I could see the curve of her back under the plain old dress.

"This girl had an affair with her married employer. They had planned to flee to the neighboring country, but her lover did not show up at the appointed place. He had got cold feet and withdrawn."

Even if Martha could overhear our conversation, she didn't show it. She lay still like a fetus, her knees pulled up to her chest.

"This guy is probably still leading a peaceful and comfortable life in the city. Even Martha's newborn child has been taken away. Since then, she no longer says a word," the boss said with a sigh.

Given what usually shown in historical movies, she seemed very young to be the leader of a group of prisoners.

"But if they have planned to run away together, both must be punished!"

"Wrong. It's always the woman's fault, for she has seduced the man. And since the guy has sworn that he was tricked and he didn't want to have anything to do with such a woman, he was set free. Your partner has been thrown into prison?"

"Apparently, yes."

"That means until the end he did not abandon you. You are to be envied, being loved so much."

I couldn't help having goose bumps all over. But this is definitely not the way things happened!

With the daylight, the room gradually became brighter, and I could see what it looked like. Five bunk beds stood against the left and the right walls, leaving only a narrow passage in between. The room was cramped, dark and grim - similar to the prison from which the young Paul Newman in Cool Hand Luke has broken out.

The woman, who talked to me, had shockingly skinny hands and legs, with knuckles bulging out. She looked over thirty, but probably she was much younger. She was not exactly a beautiful woman, but her eyes shone with a strong will, and they gave the impression of strength and self-confidence.

Outside, a trumpet blared. My roommates, who had slept till now, immediately sprang from their beds. With incredible speed, they slipped into their work clothes. If they had been in a late-night TV show, they could have won a tight competition for 10,000 yen.

"What's your name?" the boss asked me, while she tied her shoe laces.

Who was I again? Oh yes!

"Mabo! My name is Mabo!"

"I'm Norika. Well then, Mabo! The jailer will be here soon. If you're not ready by then, there won't be breakfast."

I managed to sit up. My muscles and joints hurt as if I had played a double-header game the previous day. If I did

not do some stretching, my body would have to bear unpleasant consequences the whole day.

"Stand up!"

As typically shown in American movies, a prison guard opened the door, a club dangling on his hip. His eyes immediately fell on me because I still had not been able to stand up straight.

"Collective punishment!" He shouted, and disappeared again.

Angry voices and sighs filled the room. It was clear that they would have to start the day on an empty stomach.

"What was that? Was that my fault? I'm sorry, please forgive me," I shouted to everyone in the room.

"It's okay. After all, you had no idea. Things never go well on the first day," Norika laughed feebly, trying to comfort me.

Still, I felt guilty. No one would get breakfast, it was not healthy at all.

I tried to make my aching muscles move so that I could at least make it to the roll call.

"Why did they put me here in the women's quarter?" I asked.

"Where else? There are only women camps around here."

"Oh."

I followed the women out.

Endless dry land spread out in front of me, with nothing in sight but a rocky mountain, sand, and some withered trees. A miniature Ayers Rock. The facility itself housed six cabins with a total of over one hundred inmates.

The bare rock surface was riddled with numerous holes. The women formed lines and climbed into the shafts one by one without saying a word to each other. Everything went quietly and in order. The workers were all skinny, dirty and exhausted. They were bound together with chains around their hips.

Not another chain, I thought.

The sun already shone very strong. Sweat immediately poured out from every pore on my skin. It was impossible to see how the mine was designed, but it couldn't be very comfortable inside.

This was clearly forced labor!

Just because they fell in love with someone they were not supposed to be in love with, they were forced to be slave laborers. What was going on with this country?

I was instructed not to enter the mine. Along with four or five other male convicts, I was to haul heavy bags under the blazing sun. The women dug up mountains of spotted stones, among which there were shiny gold pebbles now and then. Everything was pulled out of the mine on carts. In a square area outside, older women sorted the output into piles of comparably sized stones and filled linen pouches with those. These pouches were then packed more carefully into bags, which we carried to the warehouse.

This was a mine of exorcists-stones.

The other men were all bearded, burly guys. Since I had no desire to be plagued by nightmares for three nights, I avoided them. I imagined the circumstances that brought them here.

At any moment, the guards were ready to pound down on the prisoners with their sticks, sometimes even with shovels and hoes. After having towed a few bags, I began to believe that this horrific and surreal scene could be just a bad dream. In the middle of a summer holiday in the 21st century, I was torn away from the Sea World in Saitama, Japan, and thrown into a forced labor camp. And it might not be for just one day. In the end I might have to drag these heavy bags of shit at the foot of this mini Ayers Rock for all eternity. Perhaps I would never be able to get out of here again.

Or maybe it was all just a dream! I might be in fact taking a nap on the floor at my home in Japan, and something like a beast was sitting on my chest, which caused me this nightmare. I tried pinching, cutting and kicking myself to wake up, but it didn't help. The damned dream went on and on and on.

A small corner of my soul trusted that someone would come to my rescue. I only needed to grit my teeth for a little while longer. I was certain Conrad would eventually show up and save me. I kept looking out for him with each trip to and from the mine.

But how about Gwendal? The dungeon was definitely no picnic either.

My ears turned red with shame for my own selfishness. I'm fine, Conrad. Please save your brother first. I can stick it out for at least another week. I could imagine that I was in a super tough training camp for professional baseball players. I had to consider this whole thing as nothing more than a hard basic training, although I could not get rid of the feeling that I was building some unnecessary muscle groups here. I struggled with bags after bags full of stones that pierced into my shoulder, staggering toward the warehouse, a construction much more splendid than our quarter. I would have been much more useful if I had had a bath and breakfast.

After the lunch break, for which we got only a tiny ration of water, a guard grabbed my collar and dragged me to a hut. The sun glared down relentlessly through the sky.

"Is this the new boy we got today?" Asked a voice.

The funny man who just spoke to us sat in a rocking chair on a wooden porch, sipping a glass of red liquid, as if he was enjoying his holiday. His hair, eyebrows and beard were of different colors. I immediately gave him the nickname Tricolor.

"Yes, that's the boy, Master Togrikol."

Hey, I had almost hit the mark!

Togrikol's small son sat on his knees. The boy looked about six years old. Unlike his father, he had ordinary brown hair and eyebrows. Of course he hadn't got a beard yet.

"Who's that?" I muttered gruffly.

The heat and the empty stomach had made me throw all my manners to the wind and even ignore the possibility that this man could be an important person.

Tricolor-Junior, who had clung to the knee of his father, raised his little voice like a child star in a musical show.

"My father is an important man, he will find in this mine the best exorcists-stone in the world!"

"For all I care," I said, "he should kindly climb into the shaft and dig himself."

More than ten workers nearby turned around and shot sharp glances like arrows in my direction. They probably feared another collective punishment.

Togrikol stroked his red beard, and turned to his son.

"Nello, do you want to play with this boy?"

"Yes, plaaaayyy!"

The child hopped down the steps and threw himself hard against my hip. Although he was only a small preschooler, I began to stumble and fell. All who had observed us went back to what they were doing.

But if I slacked off, I wouldn't even get dinner. I started to move back towards the square area where the women were filling up the bags. Tricolor-Junior had, however, clung to my legs so tightly that it was incredibly difficult to lift them up.

"Plaaaayyy, plaaaayyy, plaaaayyy!"

"Okay, okay! But only if you can guarantee me a dinner," I growled.

"You can have dinner at our home. Our chef cooks delicious food!"

"You guys have your own chef?"

This boy looked strong and muscular for his age, which brought back in my mind the image of a little boy, falling and crying in the small alley, Jilda. They had the same height, but Tricolor-Junior had thicker shoulders and neck. Was it just because they were born into different families that they would grow up to be so different? Clutching at my hips, Nello looked up to me with begging eyes.

"Okay, okay, all right, I'll play with you." Since his father was the chief warden, I probably wouldn't get my head bitten off if I did not return to work.

"What do you want to play? Wait, I know! How about throwing balls?"

"No, horse!"

Instinctively I looked around but there were no horse in sight.

"How about we go to the large sand dune over there, and I'll draw a horse for you? But you must not expect too much, I'm very bad at drawing."

"Horse!" Tricolor Junior cried again.

"Okay, okay, I'm drawing your horse now. I'll try my best not to make it look like a giraffe... woa!"

Tricolor Junior had jumped on my back without any warning. My spine groaned under the weight of this well-fed six-year-old.

"Oh, I am supposed to be the horse? But this is a stupid game."

"Run!" Nello yelled and slapped me on the butt. It would be useless talking to such a little preschooler about human rights.

The boy squealed happily and I ran. No other choice. Strictly speaking, I crawled on all fours. I tried to convince myself that this was also a work out for certain muscle groups. At any rate I didn't make quite an elegant sight as the Black Beauty.

When we had gone for about 200 meters away, we noticed a strange scene in the shadow of the rocks. A guard was holding a bundle under his arm while another was digging into the sandy ground with a spade. In front of us were innumerable small mounds the size of basketballs.

"What are they doing there?"

"These are graves. They must be burying a baby again," said Nello, his voice showed absolutely no emotion as if he was stating a matter of fact.

"They are burying what?"

"A baby. These are their tombs. The larger ones over there are tombs of the adults."

On the graves there were neither tombstones nor flowers.

Since I had shown interest, Tricolor-Junior rose from my back and proudly explained.

"These women are bad people who don't actually deserve any grave. But because my father is great and gracious, he still has them buried when they die."

"But why are the babies here?" I asked.

"Well, women make babies, stupid."

I felt a strong desire to smack the boy across his ear, but I held back. These were certainly not his own words, but those his father taught him.

"All these women are bad, because they se...se...seduced the men. That's why they are brought here. Then they bring the babies into the world. But no one wants these babies, so they die."

"Say that to your mother."

Tricolor-Junior was a bit surprised. Still smiling, he asked:

"Say what to my mother? What I've just said? "

"Yes, tell her what you've just said. In fact, tell your teachers as well, and see what they have to say to you."

"Okay, I will. But why?"

"Because what you just said is wrong. And you may only complain about women when you have had your heart broken after your first love."

My first love was a glamorous woman with extremely beautiful legs that she liked to show off. Although she was Japanese, she had soft curly blond hair. I, an innocent preschooler, used to follow her like a stalker.

Then one day, in a public bath house, I saw her going into the men's bathroom. My first love was a man, a drag queen! Enough about this topic.

While I talked to Junior, the guard struggled with the spade. He dug a hole that was barely large enough for a rugby ball. The other put the bundle under his arm to the ground. It was a shapeless lump wrapped in a dirty cloth.

"Strange..." I muttered. I had the impression that the bundle had moved, almost imperceptibly.

Suddenly I heard the screams of women. When I looked around, I saw a group of women running towards the graves - Ms. Norika, the leader of my group, along with our roommates.

"Please wait! That's Martha's child! Four days ago he was taken away from her right after birth. She says that the

child was still alive."

"Do you women really think that we would bury a living child? He neither cries nor moves. He's dead. We just want to give him a final resting place, damn it!"

Other guards came running; six of them pulled the chains on the female prisoners. One of the women let out a shrill cry, tore loose from the guards and tried to run to the grave.

"Damned woman!"

Tricolor quietly approached with several guards following behind. Stroking his beard, he looked at the prisoners, who were being beaten with batons and spades.

"What are they screaming about?" He asked.

My temples swelled briefly, but with an astonishing self-restraint, I immediately brought my emotions under control.

"She thinks that her baby was still alive, and she wants him back," one of the guards said with a greasy smile.

"Nonsense!" Tricolor laughed out loud.

Impulsive actions were never good. So far my hasty sense of justice had not brought anything good. At this moment, I must stay calm and bear with it. In any case, Conrad and Gunter were both not here to back me up. Even if Gwendal and Wolf had been here, they would have had their own problems to deal with. However, all my determination vanished as I heard what Tricolor had to say next.

"Even if that's the case, does it make a difference whether the bastard is still alive or dead?"

That was too much. My self-control was gone, never to return. I clenched my fists and bit my lip.

Last Friday evening, I saw a movie scene in which Bruce Willis, still had lots of hair on his head, single-handedly fought against a group of terrorists. My father said: "It's very difficult to fight against an overwhelmingly large number of the enemy, and he is all alone. He can't win."

But, didn't he win? Fighting against the enemy all alone was surely difficult, but there was still a difference between 'difficult' and 'impossible.'

"Stop!" I cried. "Of course it makes a difference! And even if the child is already dead, you ought to respect the dead a bit more! You could have at least read some prayers, and let the mother say goodbye to her child. That is how it should be done! You want to be a great chief warden? A disgrace to the title, that's you!"

"What's the problem with that new boy? Is he a preacher?"

"Hey, boy, shut your mouth up at once! Otherwise we'll throw you into the hole!"

The greasy smile on the guard's face was gone. He rushed up to me to stuff my mouth. With the I bent my upper body to dodge him, escaped his paws and head butted Tricolor.

"You can't silence me! There are still a few more things I have to say! What is all this nonsense? You can't clap with one hand! Why is it that you condemn the women only when they are involved in an illicit relationship? It takes two to fall in love and to make love; you can't blame it all on one!"

Now there was no turning back. I went off like a rocket.

"We must honor the equality between men and women in all situations. Besides, you are violating all basic human rights in this camp! An inspection of the UN would hold you accountable, you can bet on it!"

Togrikol glanced at me fleetingly out of the corner of his eye and turned back to look at the center of action.

The dust whirled up from the dry earth. More and more women came running, wailing and screaming. More and more guards joined in thrashing them. A small woman with disheveled hair and outstretched hands let out a shrill cry. The guards grabbed her clothes and dragged her backwards. Every time she would fall heavily to the ground, and every time she would relentlessly pick herself up, trying to move forward.

"He's alive! He's alive! I know it, she cried. "He is my child!"

It was the silent Martha, who had finally found her voice.

While his subordinates tried to bring the upheaval under control, the chief warden lifted the bundle. He obviously wanted to throw it into the grave.

Before I could convince myself that I had perhaps just become the victim of a hallucination, I already stormed off.

The bundle had moved!

Maybe the wind had just played me a prank, but in a flash of the cloth, I saw something dark red definitely moving.

"Stop!" I shouted.

The white-brown lump was thrown into the air. I saw him fall as if in slow motion, the torn cloth fluttering behind. The hole was exactly the right size, as if it had been measured. It was anxious to swallow the new inhabitant.

With all my strength I stretched out my arms, eyes firmly fixed on the bundle. The sand ruthlessly scalded my arms and elbows, but I pulled a head-sliding straight out of a textbook. My fingertips caught the bundle just in time. Quick as lightning I drew it to me and secured it.

"He moved!" I screamed.

And he did indeed! Through the thin fabric, I could even feel gentle warmth.

"He is still warm. He is not dead! This child is still alive!"

I was overwhelmed by my emotions, and could speak no more. With trembling fingers, I began to remove the wrapping cloth. The women were frozen in the air. Only Martha tearfully prayed in a croaking voice.

I sat on the floor; the warm, soft bundle lay on my knees. I anxiously lifted the last shreds off of him.

My mind froze for a moment. I was shocked, horrified and paralyzed.

"What have you done to him?" I finally asked in a hollow voice.

The baby was breathing. Even if only slightly, his narrow and dark red shriveled breast raised and lowered. Both eyes and mouth were closed, his skin was completely dry. Also, the clenched hands were not moving; the left arm was lying sideways on the belly. His right arm and his right leg were twisted unnaturally.

"What did you do to this child? How could you ..."

He was not even crying.

The mother had escaped the men and took her son into her arms. The other women were surrounded together in a circle, clubs and spades kept pounding down on them.

What barbarians!

The demon stone on my chest was burning hot on my skin, I could hardly breathe. In a corner somewhere in the depths of my skull, an electrical spark rushed through the synapses. The shock crept along my spine and, resonating with my heartbeat, exploded in my ears. The low and high-pitched ringings in my head struggled with unbearable ferocity against one another.

As in an explosion, where there was a yellow stretch of dry land, now I could see nothing but snow-white smoke. I was suddenly flooded with a euphoric bliss. One of my brain cells brought back the name of a person of unsurpassed beauty.

I will...

Who would?

What happened after that, I do not know.

Chapter 9

Including those on the other side of the gate, the number of guards easily exceeded two hundred. In all likelihood, it was but a women's camp housing inmates who had violated the marriage laws.

"But why would they need such a strong defense?" wondered Conrad.

Crouching and sliding down the slope, he returned to his taciturn younger brother. Wolfram was leaning against a plant, frowning, his arms folded on his chest.

There were presumably a large amount of exorcists-stones in the area. These stones caused great pain to those who possessed strong magical power. Since Wolfram had earlier complained about headaches, Conrad himself was uncertain whether he could count on him in battle.

"You should better decide now if you can bear it or not," he turned to Wolfram. "I will not be able to cover you in battle."

"Who do you think I am? I can perfectly handle it myself!"

"Good to know."

Conrad had sent six men to help Gwendal break out of prison. He only had as few as fifteen men left to deal with two hundred guards. There was only one tactic to handle such an overpowering force: they had to raid the camp and cause as big a chaos as possible.

"Wolf ..."

"What? You're getting on my nerves!"

"You're leaning on a cactus."

Wolfram yelped and covered his mouth with both hands. Twenty to thirty thick spikes had pierced through his clothes.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner, dammit!"

"I thought you knew."

Despite the tense situation, a wry smile slipped upon Conrad's face. The figure in front of him, with folded arms and frown lines on his forehead, suddenly reminded him of his older brother.

"Are you still torturing yourself with that matter?" Asked Conrad.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't pretend, now. You know what I mean. The matter regarding His Majesty and Gwen."

"That's not what I'm thinking about at all!"

"Actually you don't need to worry. You know they don't get along well. If you do not trust His Majesty a little more, one day he will really have enough of you."

"But I'm not worried!"

"That's fine then."

"Why do you understand him so well?" Wolfram asked quietly.

"Our King? I already knew and liked him, even before he was born, so to speak."

As he did not say more, Wolfram had to be content.

"But, why do we have to make matter worse to help this woman? Why do we have to care about such a person?" he grumbled.

"Nicola has given us information."

Without that piece of information, they might have never figured out the whereabouts of Yuri and Gwendal. Even if they could eventually, it would have taken much more time. After she had done them a big favor, they couldn't refuse her request to be taken to the Great Demon Empire.

A soldier's horse snorted peacefully and wagged his tail to chase insects away.

"Still! She is Gegenhuber's mistress! Had it not been for him, you would have long since become Lord of Wincott's Manor!"

"It's not important."

"And what about Julia's death? Is it also unimportant?"

"Wolfram ..."

At that moment, it occurred to Conrad that right after his birth, this brother of his, who looked exactly like their mother, had let no one but him hold him in his arms. Since then Conrad had been the one who took care of Wolfram each and everyday. Until the little boy learned that his second oldest brother was half-human. Thereafter, the immaculate Gwendal became Wolfram's object of admiration and reverence.

Conrad shook his sword scabbard forcefully to rid it off the fine sand grains.

"That was a long time ago," he said. "Everything was a long time ago. Even if Huber had not caused things to unfold the way they did, Julia and I... I just can't explain why he has fallen in love with a girl like Nicola."

Gegenhuber was in fact an outspoken hater of human race.

"Well, after all it was possible with you."

"Don't change the subject!" Snapped Wolfram. "Have you forgiven Huber's crime? Is that why you agree to take his wife to our country and ..."

"No, that's not the reason."

Yuri would not have wanted otherwise. Although he had not heard from him personally, Conrad was convinced. Yuri would gladly take the women who loved the demons to his country.

Lord Weller let his thin sword slide back into the scabbard. He squinted his eyes to look at the faraway horizon behind the fence.

"I just want to fulfill the wishes of His Majesty," he said.

The setting sun became redder, the shadows longer. If they hadn't needed the protection of darkness, Conrad would have liked to start the raid immediately.

"Let's discuss our tactics again. I know it's dangerous to move forward in groups of three, but we don't have any other choice... What happened over there?"

An incoming message suddenly caused a commotion among the guards who posted outside the gate. Since the rock they were hiding behind provided a large enough cover, Conrad did not think that they had been discovered.

He could hear screams and explosions from the other side of the high fence. The soldiers who had been standing outside the fence rushed inside one after the other.

"Something has happened. Maybe a disturbance or a riot. I just hope that His Majesty is not in danger."

"It's impossible..."

Wolfram pressed his left hand against his forehead, knelt down on the ground and lowered his head.

"A strong magic ... in a place full of exorcism forces ... That's impossible ... "

"You feel something?"

"A magical force... strong and awful ... not to say nasty. Wait, I have felt something like this before..."

A nightmarish doomsday scenario flashed through Conrad and Wolfram's minds. They both recalled Yuuri's uproar on the pirate ship.

"Is it something to do with His Majesty..."

"Yes, that's him."

To sneak secretly into the camp, Conrad and Wolfram robbed uniforms from a couple of wandering soldiers. The rest was a breeze: no one stood in their way, they were able to infiltrate undetected.

They ran to the other side of the low rock hill, in the direction where the screams and the furious roar came from.

"It is indeed..." Wolfram murmured dumbfounded. The sleeves of his uniform were too long for him.

Numerous mounds of earth, large and small, were scattered all over the area. Although there were no tombstones or flowers, these seemed to be graves.

His Majesty was standing in front of the graves, legs slightly apart, chest thrust out. He looked weary, but he had not suffered from any major injuries.

Conrad let out a sigh of relief. Wolfram looked as if he would have liked to run toward Yuuri and pull him into his arms. But to rashly interfere with Yuuri in this condition could bring more harm than good. Conrad couldn't help thinking that he looked as majestic as his title.

He had seen a similar sparkle in Yuuri's eyes before.

"Hey, something just flew out of his eyes," called Wolfram.

"Those must be his contact lenses."

Without the colored contacts, both Yuri's eyes were jet black. Now that he had entered his Maou's mode, there was nothing they could do but sit down and watch his performance.

The terrified women were all paralyzed. The soldiers and the guards tried to find the best way to attack, but Yuri's defense seemed quite solid.

A mild tremor started, as if at any moment, a dragon would rise from the depths of the earth. At first they felt a swaying under their feet, then the vibration continued until it reached the core of their bodies.

"These women had unselfishly sacrificed themselves in the name of love! They boldly devoted themselves to their lovers! But instead of admiration, they earned violence! The authority punished them in heartless and inhuman way!"



Yuri spoke as if he was on the stage. He acted like an actor from one of his favorite old-time historical series. "Both parties were involved in the intimate relationship between men and women. Nevertheless, only the weak has to bear all the blame!"

The tremors stopped - but only for a moment.

"No one can judge two lovers! Separate them? Make them swear to part from each other? These are the outdated deeds from the days of the geisha! No one in the world has the right to condemn them!"

"Oh, His Majesty seems to have expanded his repertoire," Conrad muttered calmly.

Master Tricolor was standing behind Yuuri, eyes wide open in disbelief. He was so surprised by the transformation of his son's 'horse' that he even forgot to stroke his red beard.

"Violence, oppression, and misery prevail in this facility. Deprived of human dignity, the women had to bear even the utmost injustice: Their babies being buried alive! What a cruel tyranny! Even the devils from hell would be appalled at these actions!"

Yuri raised his right arm to the sky and swung it down theatrically. His index finger pointed directly at Togrikol. He gave a brief yelp and fell to the ground.

"It is not my intention to destroy and to take life, but ... I have no choice, I will smite thee with my sword!"

There was only one catch: there was no sword in sight.

Then came an eerie rattle sound. All eyes turned toward the graves at once. The faint-hearted fainted, even braver men shrieked.

In the sunset, brown arms with curved fingers, like the claws of birds of prey, shot up from the graves and stroke with a reckless vengeance.

First one, then two, and finally, innumerable arms broke out of the graves, followed by bodies that rose out of the ground up to the chest or the hip.

Even Wolfram, who had been through a lot, stopped in mid air at the sight.

"They...They are corpses. Zombies."

"The sentence should be executed!"

The bodies spread their arms and rocked back and forth like seaweed.

It was a creepy sight. Everywhere people were scrambling on top of each other, screaming and wailing. At Yuri's feet, the word: "Justice" was drawn in the sand.

"No, they are not corpses," said Conrad. "Even if they looks the same, these are not human arms. It's all just sand and earth. They are but clay figures."

"Clay figures! But what do we do now ...? They made such a mess. I've never seen such a nasty magic before!"

"So you say every time."

The clay-zombies who had performed the seaweed-dance of the dead souls had melted and merged together, taking the shape of a giant human about the size of a Godzilla. As the giant made one step forward, people scattered frantically in all directions. All were afraid of being crushed to death under its feet.

"Amazing! His Majesty has mastered the special-effects in the making of monster movies."

"Co. ..Co. ..Conrad, now is not the right time for praises!"

Even though children would usually love monster movies, the son of the head jailer was so frightened that he had soiled his pants.

"Arms forward, then sideways! Now comes the exercise for arms and legs! "

For some reason, Yuri's commands sounded like an aerobics teacher's instructions.

Every time the clay giant moved according to the instructions, it demolished a part of the mine. The mine openings were smashed beyond recognition, dust and dirt rising everywhere.

Togrikol, stricken by immeasurable horror, crawled away trying to escape.

"A devil! A spawn of hell!"

"You dare calling me a spawn of hell? Do you not recognize this noble face?"

When Yuri said that with the voice of the Invincibles, the soldiers and the majority of the women threw themselves to the ground, even though they had no idea which kind of god he was.

"How can we stop him just now?" Conrad asked casually.

"Do not ask me," Wolfram said coldly.

Suddenly the crowd broke apart to make way for a military horse coming through, galloping and snorting violently. As it went past the legs of the clay giant, its rider jumped out of the saddle toward Yuri. Without hesitation, the man came up to him and grabbed his collar with his left hand.

"Gwendal?" cried Wolfram, but Lord von Voltaire, covered with wounds all over, did not hear him.

"What is ... the point... of that ...?!" Gwendal yelled at Yuri. "Haven't you done enough? Do you want people to die? Answer me!"

"Who are you ...?"

"Listen, Yuuri! You must stop this right now. Return the monster to dust!"

Gwendal shook Yuuri back and forth violently, bringing some senses back to him.

"You selflessly put yourself in danger to stop me! What a daring courage! Given your brave heart, for now... I'll retreat."

Yuri then collapsed to the ground, unconsciously.

Chapter 10

In the meantime, the melodies of "The blue Danube" by Johann Strauss kept playing in my head. And it was not the full-scale version performed by an orchestra, but the cheap version the like of a call center's hold tone.

The scorching sun earlier had burnt my skin had now become milder. Even if I slept out in the open with no sun protection, I wouldn't suffer from a sunburn. By night fall, the temperature dropped rapidly. The cool gentle breeze caressed my skin and brought me back to consciousness.

Vaguely feeling like being rocked back and forth, I woke up to find myself lying on Tricolor's rocking chair. Still sleep-deprived, I carefully forced open my eyelids, stuck as if being glued. My eyes were dry and sore.

"What ..." I mumbled.

The first thing that I could see was thick golden strands shimmering in the moonlight. Before I had time to appreciate this beautiful sight, someone was already yelling at me.

"Why do you always do this?"

"Wolf?"

"What?"

"Wa...Water..."

That didn't seem to be the response he expected. His eyebrows squished together in anger. He grabbed my head and pushed my face into the water basin nearby.

"Drown in it!"

I drank. Water went inside me not only through my mouth but also through my nose and ears.

"Ouch... Stop it! I'm drowning, I'm really drowning here. Please forgive me!"

"Do you know how worried I was about you?"

Angering a bishounen, even if one was not at fault, would result in painful consequences. At the same time, I felt tremendous guilt since it was indeed my own impulsive action that caused trouble to everyone.

"Wolfram, what are you doing here? Where is Conrad? And what about Gwendal!? We must get him out, or he'll be executed!"

"My brother has already managed to break out of prison. Now you kindly answer me. Do you even know how worried I was about you?"

Even though I perfectly knew that we were both guys, being pursued by such a beautiful boy like him still caused my heart to skip a few beats. At times like this, the most effective solution was to avoid looking at his face and keep chanting "He is 82 years old" like a mantra.

I shift my gaze away from Wolfram to the darkening surrounding. I could see neither the women nor their slave-driving guards. Since I had slept the whole time, I could not explain how they had been released, by which miracle. I must have done something horrible and frightened everyone. That was why they looked so pale, wasn't it? I must have scared the hell out of them...

"Yes, yes, I know you've been worried. I was worried myself. I know exactly how you felt."

"You sure can talk the talk! Now sit still, I'll get something for you to eat."

After throwing in my face a cloth that smelled like sun, he stomped off noisily toward the hut that used to be Tricolor's office. Yes, food sounded like a good idea. I could not even remember when I had my last meal. As a punishment, we had not been given any breakfast.

What had become of my poor roommates, who were also punished for my mistake? Where was Norika, the leader, or Martha and her half-dead baby? How long had I slept?

I got up and slowly walked down the steps. Somewhere in the direction of the graves, I saw a small flame flickering. Although cold sweat ran down my back at the thought that it could be a ghost or a walking fire, I was inevitably drawn there. The fluctuating light moved now and then, sometimes lowered down to the ground.

As I got closer, I saw shadows of human beings reflected in the dark. At least that was somebody, not a walking fire. But who would wander in a cemetery at night? There could only be two possibilities: someone visiting a grave or the dead resurrected.

"Hey, you over there! Do you happen to be zombies? If so, no problem! I would not do anything to harm you! Nice to meet you."

"Is it you, Your Majesty?"

A zombie wouldn't be able to ask me that question. Thank God, it was only Conrad, holding a torch in his hand. He lit up the ground for someone who was digging furiously.

"Mrs. Norika, is that you? Why are you digging here in the middle of the night?"

"I'm looking for something."

Conrad shrugged his shoulders and smiled, as if that were the most normal thing in the world. He raised the torch into the air. Now I could see things around us.

"This will be the last one," Conrad spoke to Norika.

The mounds of earth, which as I remembered used to be in neat rows, had all been dug up but one. In a different situation, this would have been considered grave desecration, a serious crime.

I squatted down to help the woman who was working like a demon.

"Never mind," Norika stopped me. "It is my child after all. I want to find him myself."

"Your child?"

Norika lifted her face up a little bit and smiled faintly as she looked into my eyes. Damn, where were my contact lenses when I needed them?

"Thank you for saving Martha's baby. And thank you for giving these guys a lesson."

So there! I had apparently struck again. My guardian, who must have witnessed everything, said nothing as usual. His face had the same calm and composed expression, except the corner of his lips lifted a little bit.

"Your real name is not Mabo, is it?" asked Norika.

"No. But weren't you afraid of me? Everyone I've met so far was shocked when they saw my black eyes."

"Why should I be afraid?"

She touched my cheek with her fingers, still covered in sand and dirt. She smiled, lines forming on her tan wheat-colored face around her eyes.

"Let me look at you closely. Would you mind bringing the torch a little closer please? Wow, really, your eyes are of a deep, clear black. I've never seen such beautiful eyes. My husband said he had once seen a beautiful old portrait of the revered Sage in the Royal Castle. He even told me several times that the noble and intellectual Sage had a pair of black eyes, just like yours, and shiny smooth hair of the same color."

"Who was he?"

"He was a demon, same as you two."

A soldier with a familiar face approached to report to Conrad. After receiving a short answer, he returned to his post.

Norika set out to work again, pushing soil aside with bare hands.

"I'll fetch a spade," I said.

"No, it's okay. I want to dig him up with my hands. With these hands I want to find my beloved son whom I have given birth to. They told me he was a stillborn. They didn't even let me see his face. I gave up. Maybe he could still be saved, like Martha's baby. There's nothing I can do about that though, it's been ten years. But I've sworn that if one day I could get out of here, I would not leave without my child, under any circumstances. Even if all that's left of him is a bone, or a strand of hair."

Probably she had fallen in love with a demon, just like Nicola. Unfortunately for her, someone must have found out and she ended up being persecuted and forced to work like a slave in this place. However, the fault actually did not lie with these women, but with those who harbored discrimination and deep-rooted prejudice.

"I wish Yozak had been just as lucky."

Conrad looked up to the sky for a moment.

"Countless women and children have been imprisoned in this place. They all shared the same fate. Some have even laid down to rest here forever. Although they are not related to me, but seeing how they were treated, I wish they would be freed."

"Then, have they all been freed?"

"I would say so. The living, and the dead, too. The problem is that the guards have all fled away, so probably their reinforcements will arrive very soon."

The torch was held such that light fell on Norika's hands but Conrad's face was hidden in the dark.

"Yet you seem to be very happy."

"You can tell that from my voice?"

"No, not your voice."

I did not need to see his face to know its expression.

"I'd like to leave this place tonight to gain some ground on them." Conrad brought us back to reality. "Gwendal and his men are already busy preparing for departure. You should also start getting ready, Your Majesty."

"But what has become of all the women?" I asked.

Norikas fingertips touched something. She cried out softly and continued digging.

"They have gone through terrible things. They were chained together and sent into narrow, hot pits. I do not know how valuable the exorcist's stones are, but these women have been exploited shamefully. Can they still return to their families?"

"We have opened the prison's gates. At least for now, they are free to do as they wish. That's all we can do from our side. Now it is entirely up to them how they want to lead their lives in the future. If they return to their homes, it is possible that they will be captured and enslaved again. Perhaps they can seek help from their families and other sympathetic people and escape the dark fate. Anyway, the decision lies with the women themselves, not with us. However, there is one thing ... "

It was very unusual for Conrad not to come out immediately with what he had to say. After shifting his weight from one foot to another a few times, he put on a serious expression.

Although he already knew my answer, he got a kick out of keeping me hanging in suspense.

"There were about forty women who had been in a relationship with demons. And all of them want to go to their husbands' homeland."

"We'll take them with us of course!" I cried. "After all, we have Madame Cherie and her support for the pursue of free love! I will definitely not allow anyone to mistreat these women, ever. They'll come with us, that's the King's wish!"

"Gunther isn't here, I'll take over his role for a moment, Your Majesty: Sometimes you must first think about your decision. This is what Gunther would say. However, my personal opinion is that in some cases, it is best to follow your instincts."

"Then we'll follow them!"

Wolfram called out to me from a distance. Apparently he had found something for me to eat. When he saw that I was together with Conrad, he immediately started walking over.

Suddenly I heard a muffled sob that scared me stiff. After all, I was standing in a cemetery, who could be weeping here at the middle of the night? It was neither a ghost nor a zombie, but the mother who had been searching for her child, Norika.

"I cannot find him...There was no bones, no hair, absolutely no trace of his existence."

"Ten years is a long time," I said.

I wanted to comfort her, but could only come up with trite things. How many year would it take for a body to return to dust? Through which channel would a soul go to heaven? With no deep knowledge in science, biology or religion, I did not know what to say.

I put my hand into the deep hole that Norika had dug. The heat of the day was gone and the earth felt so cold that I could almost feel a shiver running down my spine. With a click, my fingernails hit something hard.

"What can it be?"

I pulled it out. The object was long and narrow. There were small bumps along its length. For a bone, it felt too smooth.

"I've found it too," Norika said. "But that's not my son. It's just a simple pipe. Probably a part of... "

A pipe ...?!

A part of something?!

"Impossible!" I cried.

Unbelievable! Could it be? Here in this place? Without maze and treasure map?

From my chest pocket, I took out a dark brown pipe slightly thicker than a thump. It was the pipe Nicola had given us. When I was sent to the labor camp, the guards had thoroughly examined my belongings, but no one confiscated it because it did not look like a weapon. The pipe I had with me was about 10 cm long, with three holes on one side and one on the other. The other pipe I just dug up actually consisted of two parts. They were still covered in mud, but one was clearly round and short while the other had a sort of triangular shape.

"This... this beige contrasts with the dark brown..."

I tried a few random combinations, and finally manage to put the three parts together. It was the Magic Flute!



The Magic Flute was the precious treasure of the demon tribe, could it be such an ordinary flute? But even though it looked ordinary, it might produce heavenly sounds. Instruments should not be judged by appearance, and there was only one way to tell. I wiped my dirty hands on my clothes. Then I took a deep breath ... Tatüü!

"With all respect, Your Majesty! You hold the instrument in your hands for the first time and you could already elicit a nice tune," Conrad said appreciatively. "Isn't there a Japanese saying that goes 'peaches take three years, persimmons take eight'...?"

In this situation, would that mean I'd get good results after 3 years of practice, and become proficient in eight?

"I have the feeling it's not the first time I play an instrument like this, as if I've seen it before," I said.

"Something like a *deja-vu*?"

"No, not really."

If this object was truly the Magic Flute, then all the boring music lessons I had taken at school would not be for nothing. That year we had been required to take a music course and participate in a contest. Half of my classmates had thought it was useless since we would not need this skill in the future. But who could have predicted the future? Sorry I didn't take you seriously, music teacher!

"Where did you find the other part?" asked Conrad.

"Nicola gave it to me. Nicola and her boyfriend Gegenhuber found the flute... Ah, I see now!"

The past events flashed through my mind like movie scenes. How we ran through the capital of Suveria. The bride who wanted to marry a man she did not love to save Huber. The bride in snow-white wedding dress entering the chapel. The priest, who caught the bouquet. Okay, no useful details there ...

A bald-headed man, who had introduced himself as a supporter of the demons, and his ten-year-old grandson, who grew too slowly. His mother, after being taken away for violating the marriage laws, had given birth to a child. Ten years ago, a demon who looked exactly like Gwendal had brought a new born baby to the grandfather.

"It was Huber! All threads lead back to Gegenhuber," I cried.

Meanwhile Wolfram was approaching us. When he heard the name of his relative, his mood sank through the floor.

"What about Huber?" He asked.

"He had hidden these parts here! In the fresh grave of a baby! The baby was separated from the mother immediately after birth, but Huber dug him up again!"

The mother, who did not understand half of my statements, absentmindedly ran her fingers through her hair.

"Norika! Your child is still alive! I think we can help you find him!"

"My son is still alive?"

"Yes. What is your father's name?"

Though I already knew her answer.

"Shas."

"I knew it! He is slightly cripple, right? And your father ... he informed on you? "

Norika slowly shook her head and said no with a smile and tears in her eyes.

"It was the owner of a fruit shop who sold me to the authorities. I foolishly trusted her."

Wasn't it wonderful? Now she could return to her family. I would make it happen, I guaranteed!

"But where has Gegenhuber gone after all?" Wolfram changed the topic.

"Well, I'd also like to know," I sighed.

Chapter 11

I was reputedly accountable for the destruction of the exorcist-stone excavation sites, and for the avalanche that shook the mines shut. But given my average body size, how could I have demolished a stone mountain? With a bulldozer?

I had tried to wrestle this information out of both Conrad and Wolfram, but both of them just retreated into a deep silence. Probably, I had pulled off another totally embarrassing display of magic in front of everyone. My God, I hope it didn't involve a striptease.

We wanted to set out before Suberera's army could mobilize against us. The troop heading back towards the sand dunes at the border was twice as big as it had been on the prior journey.

Some of the women had decided to risk an escape attempt with us; they wanted to start new lives. Most of our soldiers marched on foot, since it was decided that the horses should be assigned to the women. The king himself traveled comfortably, naturally, which did not please me at all.

"I have a guilty conscience, riding in this silly carriage," I said to Conrad.

"That's not a carriage; it's a sleigh, Your Majesty. A horse-drawn sleigh."

Fine, whatever, then Nicola, Wolfram, and I were sitting in a horse-drawn sleigh, which didn't make it any better at all. It felt like a luxury trip on the Orient Express. At first, they'd also thundered at Gwendal to ride in the sleigh, but since he, unlike me, knew how to assert himself, he was now riding upright in his saddle. And that too with two broken ribs.

As if that weren't enough, I had to lay down across two seats, my head softly cushioned on the thigh of Lord Bielefeld!

"Does my pillow have to be a man's lap, of all things?!" I wailed.

"Every time you do some huge magic, you sleep for two to three days," declared Wolfram, unmoved. "This time you only slept two hours. And after such a formidable performance, too. Please be so kind as to stay right where you are. You need your rest."

"All right, all right! But why the heck does it have to be with you as my pillow?!"

"Doesn't it make you happy?"

"Do I look like I'm happy?!"

"Oh, you two are truly one heart and one soul," sighed Nicola with shining eyes.

When she found out that we hadn't been able to locate Hube, she'd cried very intensely again. But her mood improved quickly when we offered her the opportunity to live in her lover's homeland. Nicola was a refreshingly positive thinker, brimming with optimism. Her smile was getting brighter all the time, and you couldn't help laughing along with her.

"Yuuri, which of the two are you actually in love with? The older or the younger brother?" she asked.

"In love...? Neither, of course!"

"You're not? But then why did you elope?"

"I never eloped!" I groaned.

Conrad, who had ridden up next to us, pushed the sleigh's curtain open from the outside. "We'll be arriving soon at the border city. Your Majesty? Oh, there you are! I didn't see you down there at first."

"Conrad, help me! Please let me ride normally, just let me ride behind you on your horse!"

"Unfortunately I can't grant your request, Your Majesty. After all, you're classified as injured."

"But I'm feeling sick from riding in here. I need to breathe some fresh air, so please get me out of here!"

Finally Conrad arranged it so that I was able to get off the sleigh. I took my place behind him. The morning sun was so dazzling that it was hard to even look forward. I clung to Conrad's hips and used him as a shield against the sun. In the shadow of his back, the journey passed in a rhythmic sway. I gradually became sleepy. Voices drifted quietly and pleasantly past my ears.

"Gwendal scolded me," Conrad said out of the blue.

"Scolded? What for?"

"Because of your hands."

My hands? But why? My left hand was free again, and it caused me no problems. The handcuffs had only left me with a light abrasion. Gwendal, on the other hand, didn't get off so lightly. Because of his strong magical abilities, the exorcist-handcuffs really affected him. The wounds weren't dangerous, but his skin was pretty well burned, and his jailbreak had left him with two broken ribs. His entire body was covered in wounds, actually. In his place, I'd have been a wailing pile of misery.

"Why, what's wrong with my hands?" I asked.

"He has probably noticed the calluses on your right hand, when he touched it. At first, he was pleased; he thought they were the result of daily sword training. Until he realized that they weren't normal sword calluses."

"Sword calluses?" I grumbled. "Where would I get sword calluses? The only thing I swing is a baseball bat."

Every evening, one hundred practice swings! Recently, I'd even traded up to a wooden bat.

For someone who'd quit the team in middle school, that wasn't a bad accomplishment!

"He accused me of doing a bad job of teaching you," Conrad continued. "The correct way to hold a sword is the first thing every beginner must learn."

"But why should that be a problem? Just tell him it's not your fault."

"You try telling him that."

Well, yeah, when you put it that way. Like I, just a kid, was going to convince the great Gwendal to change his opinions. It'll never happen!

"You two seem to be understanding each other better now."

"You think so? I'm not so sure."

I gazed toward the older brother, who'd ridden pretty far ahead of us. He sat steadily with perfect posture on the horse. No one would ever have guessed that he was injured. The guy was pretty determined, you had to give him

that.

"Well, I no longer think Gwendal hates me, anyway."

"But I've been telling you that the whole time, Yuuri! It is not remotely possible for my brother to not like you."

Well, our first meeting was disastrous. And our personalities aren't that easy to reconcile, either. No one could expect me to just accept that as fact.

"Who knows, maybe my stock took a nose-dive," I said. "It's because I absolutely had to get my own pigheaded way that Gwendal ended up with all those wounds."

It had been important to Conrad to convince me that Gwendal was really a stand-up guy. So it was only fair to bring him up to date. My opinion of the oldest brother had changed. If I were to get along with Gwendal better in the future, then Conrad was surely the one who would be most pleased by it.

"It's always a good thing, when you can get to know someone better. And our adventure was perfect for that. Now I know that even Gwendal has his weaknesses and can become emotional. He can even laugh -- even if it's not very often."

Conrad sullenly muttered something to himself.

"What was that?" I pressed.

He turned around to face me. "I said, dammit, now you're a step ahead of me." Then he smiled again as always.

"Nonsense. You two are brothers, you've had much more time to get to know each other. You should try talking one night out under the stars, that would definitely work."

When Conrad looked back, his face darkened. In the distance he'd noticed clouds of sand rising up.

"We are being pursued. That was fast."

Conrad gave orders to some of the soldiers at the head of the troop, then he tried to deliver me back to the sleigh.

"If they shoot with arrows, the cover could save your life," he tried to persuade me.

"Then it would be better to let as many of the women as possible take shelter on the sleigh!"

"When are you finally going to understand what this is all about? How often do I need to repeat it? Your Majesty's life is the top priority."

"But..."

I didn't get any further, because I suddenly spotted something very unpleasant. Further in front of us, I saw a cute figure wriggling around in the sand dunes. Its arms were spread out, and waving up and down, like a drowning person grasping out with their last strength. What a masterly achievement of stagecraft! However, we already had enough experience from our previous journey to know that this animal really wasn't about to drown in the sand.

"There's a sandbear over there again," I moaned.

"Where, Your Majesty?!"

Just like in our previous encounter, no one but me could see the bear. Gwendal had said that it was probably a trap that the exorcist-magicians laid over the area.

The situation became quite tricky. We couldn't turn back, because we'd run right into the arms of the soldiers from Svererra. We also were afraid the women would panic, if they realized how much danger we were in.

In front of us, a murderous panda, behind us, an Iroquois army. We stood under red alert.

"If we could at least delay those soldiers chasing us," said Conrad with agitation in his voice, and placed his hand on the hilt of his sword. My hand went instinctively to my hip as well, but there was naturally no sword there. But there was something else -- the flute. I grasped at it.

Could this object actually be good for something? I doubted it, but it was worth a try.

Attention please! Here the Master Flautist!Taaaaaaaaaaaaae!

The first note sounded like an old woman screaming, and every face turned towards me. The sand dunes remained hot and dry; there was no sign of rain.

But what kind of wimp throws in the towel after his very first strike? I faced the challenge again and tried a piece I had practiced many times before: the famous song "The brown bottle," the one almost all elementary and middle school students in Japan could play. I had received full mark for this piece in my music class. The soldiers gave me a little courtesy applause.

I was unstoppable. I played the anthem of the Seibu Lions, the anthem of the new club, then the anthem of the baseball team, followed by the theme song of "Kimba - The White Lion."

Everyone around me was busy taking the battle formation in preparation for the attack. The audience of my inept solo concert was getting thinner and thinner. My bag of tricks was exhausted. Now I had only a very short piece I knew by heart until the last note.

"Ryan...?« Conrad suddenly muttered in surprise.

A great human shadow was running towards us from the direction of the sandbear.

Ryan? I've heard this name before. Ryan, who was that again?While racking my brain trying to remember the name, I played the Tsutomu-Ito march. I could hear some rumbling sound mixed in the music from below.

"Drat!"

My stomach had protested loudly. Embarrassing, embarrassing, as if I could only think about food.

"A thunderstorm!" shouted someone, and an upheaval erupted.

"That was just my stomach, sorry!"

The yellow sand was turning gray. The sun that had scorched my neck disappeared. When I looked up, the sky was covered by black clouds. The first drops splashed on my face. Shortly afterward, the rain already became a downpour. Thunder roared and lightning crisscrossed the sky. That was a true-storm!

"Ryan took less than five days to tame the wild sandbear?" cried our tutor, his eyebrows shot up in an exaggerated way.

He had wrapped the Magic Flute in a cloth to protect it from fingerprints. If Gunther had known that it had been buried in a tomb instead of a corpse, he would probably be whining all over the castle halls.

"Yes, I was surprised too," replied Conrad.

"And so was I," I confirmed.

The downpour had caught the enemy troops by surprise. This gave us the necessary time to follow Ryan's lead to the hide-out built by the tamed sandbear. The rain beat down on Suberera's sand dunes as if the eternal sunshine had become but a dream. The rest of our trip was pretty pleasant and uneventful.

When I finally arrived at the royal capital, we found Gunther completely frightened for some unknown reasons. Apparently a cruel demon had abused the poor fellow as a Guinea pig. Since we took the shortcut route to the Royal Palace instead of traveling through the Kavernikov area, that I did not get to know Lady Anissina, the terror of all men. Well, thank to my luck!

As we could not find out the whereabouts of Gegenhuber, Nicola kept alternating between crying and laughing. Fortunately, his family accepted her as their daughter-in-law and provided a home for herself and her child. Since Huber, their heir, hadn't returned for almost twenty years, the Grieselas were very happy to have a new family member. And the child would even be named after me!

I was also surprised to find out that Gunter's taste in clothes had changed radically. He now had his iron-gray hair tied neatly at the back of his head, and while he still wore his narrow, elegant glasses, he was not wrapped in a creamy white monk's robes as usual, but sporting an exact copy of my T-shirts.

"As an emotional attachment to Your Majesty, to come closer to you, I have taken the liberty to have this garment prepared. Even if we are apart, our hearts remain one. I can always be with you! Isn't that fantastic?"

"Um, to be honest... Isn't your shirt too tight? "

Gunter had imitated not only the design but also the size of my shirt. The fabric on his chest and shoulders was tightly stretched. One wrong move and you could clearly see his navel. In addition, the letter >E< printed on the front was upside down.

Murata Ken always said my fashion sense was the worst. Imagine the consequences if this sort of fashion spread all over the country!

"Your Majesty, I am impressed!" Gunter sang his song of praise. "Although you played The Magic Flute for the first time, you have already mastered it, by all measures. Even in the musical field, you are blessed with an exceptional talent!"

"Almost all children in Japan can do that."

"What a fine music lesson!"

Yes, exactly.

Gwendal had gone to see the Grisela's as Nicola's sponsor. In his name, I was presented with a knitted stuffed animal about 30 centimeters long. Maybe it was a thank-you gift for the dolphin keychain.

"Aw, what a cute white pig!" I said.

Conrad tried to suppress his smile.

"Your Majesty, actually I believe that what you've got there is a white lion."

"Oh! "Oh! But then where is its mane? Or maybe it's a female? Then I'll name it Leonie."

By no stretch of the imagination did Leonie look like a white lion. But after all, it's the thought that counts.

Chapter 12

"Yuri, I never would have thought that you are capable of such a bold initiative," Wolfram said in surprise after I decided to knock on his door.

The delicate pretty boy did not know what to make of the whole thing. He tilted his head to one side and, his lips slightly open, waiting in silence for an explanation.

"I just want you to have a bath with me. If you feel embarrassed, you can keep your swim trunks on," I said.

"If it's just the two of us then there's nothing to be embarrassed about, but..."

"Then let's go! I'm in a hurry! A towel and a pair of trunks would be enough!"

In a corner of his room, Wolfram was busy digging for some strange object. Was he looking for a rubber duck to take with us?

I pulled the broadly grinning Wolfram, and head towards the familiar royal bathroom.



The private bath of His Majesty the Demon King was luxurious - the huge cream-colored pool could have easily held the world swimming championship. It was so hot in this country but there was no public swimming pool. I really wished I could share this bathroom to everyone.

The sexy queen Lady Cherie and the menservants who normally asked to wash my back were not there today, but the water still poured steadily out of the five taps shaped like lion heads. I could finally swim however I wanted to.

"One and two and hop!"

I held my nose and jumped into the pool still wearing my uniform. For a brief moment, I dived and almost touched the bottom, but I immediately came back up to the surface.

"What are you doing?" Wolfram asked, dumbfounded.

I flopped on the edge of the pool, water dripping from my hair and shirt.

"Can you push me into the pool?"

"What?"

"Come on now," I grumbled.

"What kind of foreplay is this?"

Wolfram pushed me into the water, but I immediately resurfaced.

"I don't understand," I muttered. "Hey, what are you doing?! Did I tell you to jump in too?!"

Wolfram emerged again, his blond hair totally soaked. The image was like the scene of an angel bathing. Luckily he had kept his clothes on, just like me. With two strokes, he swam over to me.

"Are you completely crazy? You did not need to jump in. I only wanted you to push me."

He wrapped his pale arms around my neck.

"Damn it, let me go!"

"Didn't you want to try a totally new way of foreplay?"

"Foreplay? What are you talking about?! What crazy perverted thoughts do you have in your mind?!"

I was completely desperate, yet my partner shamelessly indulged in his own pervert fantasies! I hung my head and swallowed my burgeoning anger. In another attempt, I put my feet firmly on the bathtub floor, and slowly stretched my knees. There was still no suction pulling me into the depths.

"I can't go home," I quietly said.

"Aren't you already home?"

"That's not what I mean. It's true that I've come back from Suveria to Shin Makoku, but now I want to go back to my home!"

Like a small child, I flapped both my arms around, hitting the water surface furiously. In order to avoid the splash hitting his face, Wolfram stood up and took a small step back.

"I can't go back, to my home, to earth, to Japan!" I cried angrily. "I thought it would be just like last time, I could return through the bathroom again. But no matter what I did, nothing happened at all! I thought if I was forced into a corner, I would enter the star journey to escape from danger... But even when you pushed me into the water, still nothing happened."

"What?"

"Wolf... why is that grimace?"

Numerous creases gathered above his nose and between his eyebrows. The ex-prince lifted his chin and pulled his shoulders back.

"You used me for this small thing?"

"It's not a small thing! This is incredibly important for me, don't you understand that much?"

"You are now the king of this country, you can't run around anymore! You've got to stay here. Yuri, your home is this castle! And that's forever!"

Every time this bishounen scolded me, I would feel the numerous wounds his words caused. As hard as it was to accept, Wolfram was probably right. My diving attempts were pointless. But what other choice did I have? I had never thought that I could never see Japan again.

"But it has always been like that so far. If I successfully completed the mission, I would be able to go back again. This time I have found the Magic Flute, and brought my double back safe and sound. The mission was successful. Why am I still stuck here, dammit! Could it be because the game was stuck at this point? If I couldn't return to Japan and remained in Shin Makoku forever, what would happen to me?"

"You would carry on your role and your life as the Maou, what else?"

Yes, true, I was the king. I had taken up this office and made my oath in front of everyone.

"But I still didn't expect to have to stay here forever. How would I know if the Lions won the champion or not? I can never go to a baseball game again!"

"Then found your own baseball team here. You've said that you wanted to make this game a national sport."

"But I'm still not good enough at the game!"

The soaked clothes weighed heavily on my body. Nevertheless, I did not sink into the depths.

"What about my team, my school, my friends? If I don't come out of the dolphin pool, Murata would suffer a blow and blame it all on himself."

Perhaps this was it. Perhaps the Yuri Shibuya from modern Japan had died in an accident during the dolphin show? And that was why I could not go back?

"Oh no, what am I going to do now? How should I explain to my family... No, probably I would not be able to utter a thing. Moreover my wife..."

"You have a wife?"

"Don't pick at my words! I meant my brother. I have my family, my parents and my brother, and suddenly I can't meet them again. Isn't it a bit too much?"

"You're unbelievably dim-witted," Wolfram groaned and brushed his wet bang back from his forehead.

His seemingly arrogant green eyes stared at me fiercely. He really does have an angel's face, but his words draw blood with each syllable.

"You belong to this world. You cannot escape, your soul is at home here."

"No one told me so."

Even I could hear the tremble in my voice.

"Don't say you didn't know what you were in for."

I had no answer to that. I had taken things too easy.

If the silence continued, I might do something stupid. So I decided to try again. I dived in hot water and repeatedly pushed myself against the bottom floor. I stayed under the water as long as I could and desperately looked for a possible opening in vain.

I couldn't abandon my resolve, I had to calm down. Hadn't the commentator in the last baseball game said "a crisis point is a turning point"? Even when forced into a situation with no escape in sight, I must stay calm and collected. If I didn't carefully analyze the surrounding, I would never find the way to break out of the deadlock.

But no matter how hard I tried, the strange whirlpool from before refused to appear.

"Hey," Wolfram called, and fished me out of the water.

I had completely forgotten to breathe.

Well, that was it then. I had to accept reality. Never again Japan. No more baseball. Never home again. The king got stuck in real deep shit.